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5 WESTERN NOVELS

DEC. 25c

Magazine

FEATURING

PIRATE ON HORSEBACK

By WILLIAM VANCE

THE WAGON TRAIN

By ED EARL REPP

THE DISTANT GUNS

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

BAIT FOR A KILLER

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

SATAN RULES THE RIVER

By D. B. NEWTON



THRILLING
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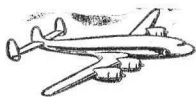


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5 WESTERN NOVELS

Magazine

Vol. 7, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

December, 1952

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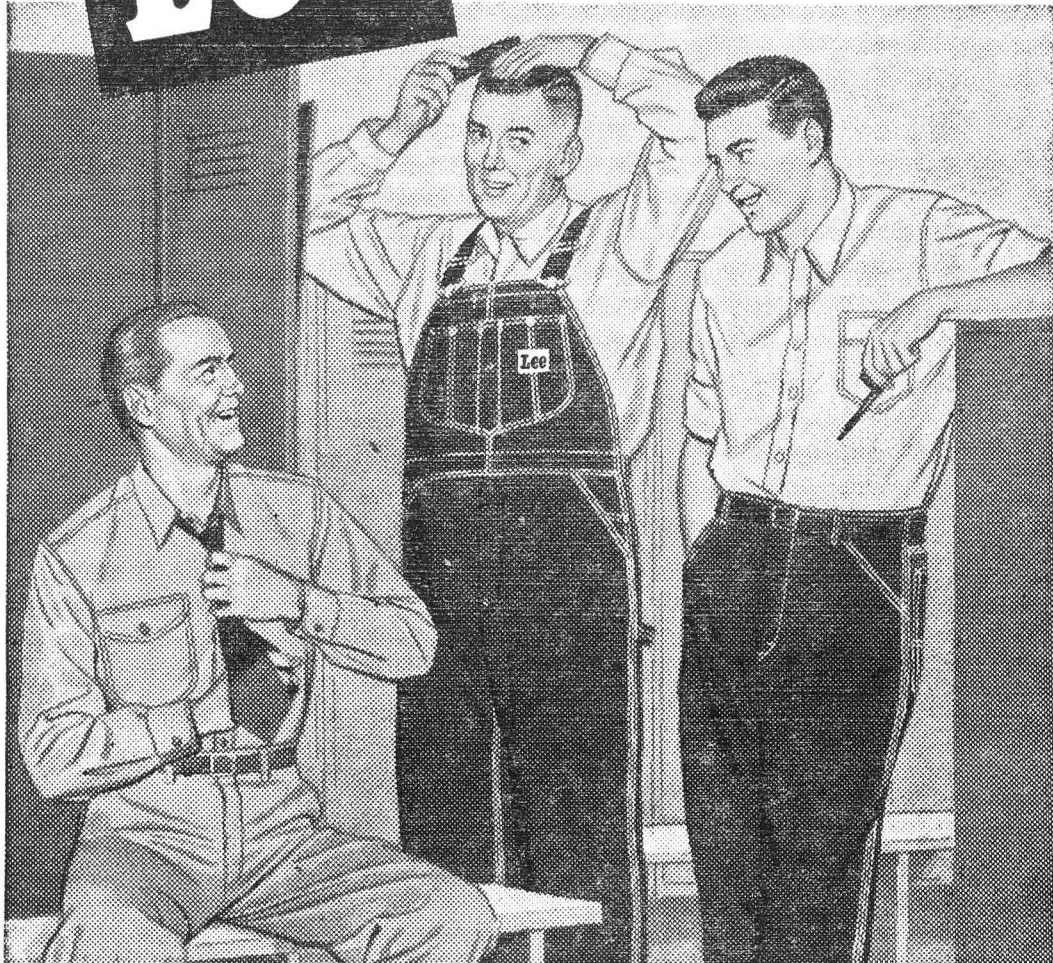
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THE MAN THAT MADE THE HAT THAT MADE THE WEST

By Allan K. Echols

MOST of the cowboys' equipment wasn't created all at once. It evolved gradually through many changes as it was called upon to serve different purposes. Saddles have been changing in design ever since the first Asiatic savage threw a sheepskin over his horse's back to make for easier riding.

But the Stetson hat was carefully designed and built for one purpose only, and is still the only thing for that particular purpose. And it has undergone practically no change since John B. Stetson sat on a rainy mountainside in Colorado and felted the fur from rabbits he had killed, and fashioned a hat to suit his purposes.

The Stetson was built by design to cover the head of an outdoorsman.

Stetson was a poor hatter in Philadelphia when he contracted tuberculosis and went to Colorado for his health, camping his way from St. Joseph, Missouri, to the Rockies. His party hit bad weather, and the leather tent they were using took on the characteristic unbeautiful smell naturally associated with the wet hide of a dead animal. The party was either soaked by rain or blistered by heat, and suffered the unlimited small annoyances of any party ill-equipped for the outdoors.

The hats men wore in those days—hats that Stetson made for a living—were nondescript, were of little protection against the weather, and were fit for nothing else.

Gradually Stetson learned by uncomfortable experience that the ordinary hat worn by the average man left a good deal to be desired as the headgear for an outdoorsman. He was familiar with the coonskin and bearskin caps of the Frontiersmen, but they were not an all-around piece of equipment. Wet, they had the usual perfume of a dead animal; in summer they were of no use at all. So, sitting in his rainsoaked tent on the side of the Rocky Mountains, Stetson made himself a hat—and started himself a tradition.

The First Stetson

He got some rabbit skins and cut the hair off, and with homemade tools he felted the rabbit hair—the same material of which the best felt hats are still made. And having made himself a big piece of felt, the hatter then showed his companions how they could fashion it into a piece of headwear which was of practical value.

There on the rainy side of his mountain, Stetson made the first of the millions of hats that were to bear his brand, and the countless millions of imitations which bear other men's brands.

Stetson did his job well. His big, high-crowned hat kept the sun off his head in blistering weather; it protected his head from rain and snow in fall and winter. It was tough enough to stand hard punishment, and

he could use it as a bucket to bring drinking water to his horse and to his camp from inaccessible spots. He could tie it down and keep his ears from freezing in a blizzard, he could cover his face with it in a raging sandstorm. And as every Western reader knows, a man could put it on a stick and elevate it over a ledge to test an enemy's six-gun prowess.

Up until this time there was no distinctive Western hat. Old Dick King, founder of the largest ranch in the world, was a steamboat captain and punched his cows in an old sea-going cap. Men even wore derbies and stove-pipe beavers in the saddle.

A massive cowman saw Stetson's hat and talked him into selling it to him for five dollars, and thus the first cattleman became an owner of a Stetson.

"Boss of the Range"

The hat-maker was cured of his lung trouble and went back to Philadelphia. But a picture haunted him. Remembering how his first customer looked, Stetson realized that the man was wearing a hat that was the natural mark of a Plainsman—the all-purpose hat. Stetson decided to introduce it to the range.

He made up samples in his Philadelphia shop and sent them West. They sold like hotcakes, since every cowman who was fortunate enough to get one of the practical headpieces was converted into a salesman immediately. Stetson called his hat "The Boss of the Range," and it lived up to its name.

The big cattle drives were under way now, and men wearing Stetsons roamed up and down the Chisholm Trail, protected from the hot suns of the Gulf Coast and the blizzards of the Canadian border under their new Stetsons. And soon nobody could consider himself a cow man unless he wore a Stetson.

Stetson's little three-story hat factory grew into a 30-acre plant before he died in 1906, and was turning out four million Stetsons a year, still modeled after the original that John B. made by hand on a rainy mountainside in Colorado.

It seems probable that the Stetson business is here to stay now that guitar players and hillbilly singers do not feel equal to facing their audiences unless they are properly hatted with a "Boss of the Range," or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of *Liberty* said on this subject:

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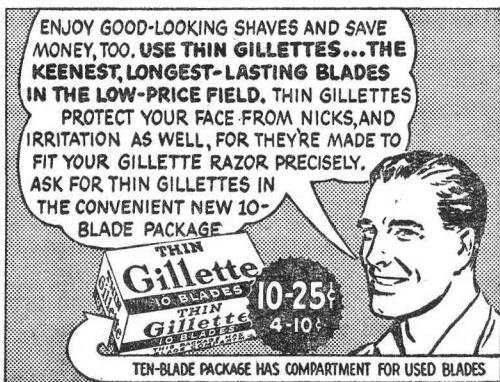
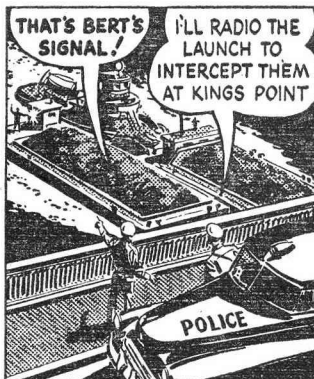
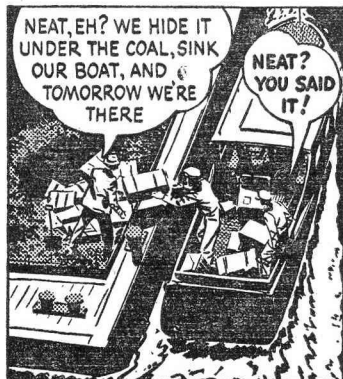
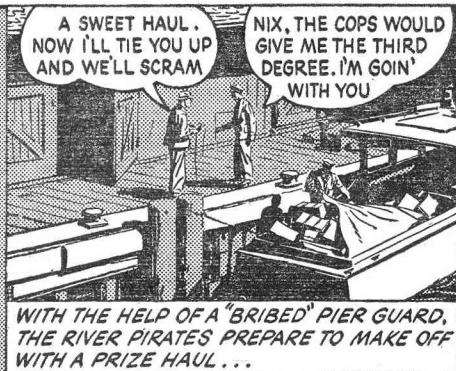
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BERT OUTSMARTS RIVER PIRATES WHEN...





OLD SPANISH “HORSE MINE”

How the Californios Caught the Wild Ones

WHILE THE early California Spanish *rancheros* didn't exactly mine their horses as you mine gold, they had an inexhaustible supply of them in the famous San Joaquin Valley. It was estimated by a visitor who went on several of these horse-hunting expeditions that the valley contained an average of more than thirty thousand wild horses.

When the Spanish felt it was time to replenish their horse supply, usually in mid-summer, a group of a dozen or more *vaqueros* would make up an expedition to the San Joaquin. They always took along their best and fastest mounts, and checked over their gear carefully before making camp.

There are many ways of catching wild horses, but the Spanish way was one of the most spectacular as well as the most dangerous for the rider, since the Spanish wanted to get as much fun out of their work as possible—and to be fun, a sport must be dangerous.

The Spanish method was for the group of *vaqueros* to unsaddle their horses, then loop a riata around the horse's middle, taking several loose turns around the animal. They then tied the working riata to the end of the one wound around the horse. Then they would mount their animals bareback, running their knees under the rope that encircled the horse's belly.

Mounted thus bareback and without stirrups, the *vaqueros* would then ride out to a band of wild horses, going straight toward them until the wild ones spooked and started running. Then the *vaqueros* would lean over their horses and start speeding toward the retreating wild ones. Sometimes the chase would last for miles before the wild ones became winded enough to slow down.

But the *vaqueros* were then ready to go into action. They would push their own horses faster and faster. Each man would pick out the wild horse he wanted and start after it. As he gained on the stud, he would eventually get close enough to throw his loop over the wild one's head.

And then the fun would begin. Pulling his own horse to a dead stop, the *vaquero* braced himself for the bump, which came when the wild one hit the end of the rope. His job then was to stay on his own horse while the wild one fought it out with the trained mount, rearing, falling, pulling against the riata that was tied to the rope running around the mount's belly.

A wild horse puts up a long and strenuous fight, and the job of staying aboard his own animal while this fight went on took all the nerve and horsemanship the *vaquero* could dig up. And sometimes it was not enough.

Frequently a rider found himself in the midst of a band of wild horses who were so spooked that they overran the *vaquero's* mount, knocked him down and pounded the rider to death with their slashing hoofs. A man on a horse with a wild one fighting the other end of his riata, and with no saddle or stirrups to help him, was often thrown or knocked off his mount and trampled to death in the fight.

The *vaqueros* might stay a week on the hunt, or until those left alive had collected half a dozen or so wild ones to take back with them, along with the story of how the missing members of the party died a “glorious” death.

Mucho fun, señores. No?

—Sam Brant

Novel by **WILLIAM VANCE**

PIRATE



For two years, they had ridden a strange trail

together—Ryan with his racehorse, and Weston

seeking the man who'd run off with his sister

I

FROM under the folds of a hot towel, Sim Ryan said, "You be there and see. And tell anyone who happens to drop in here to come, too." He winced a little and said, "Ouch!"

"You said make 'em hot," the barber reminded him and switched the towel off a brown and rugged face. "Your face'll be twice that hot and three times as red when Irv Halliday's quarter horse gets through with that nag of yours out there."

He flicked his towel toward the nondescript roan that was nuzzling the hitching-rail in front of the barbershop.

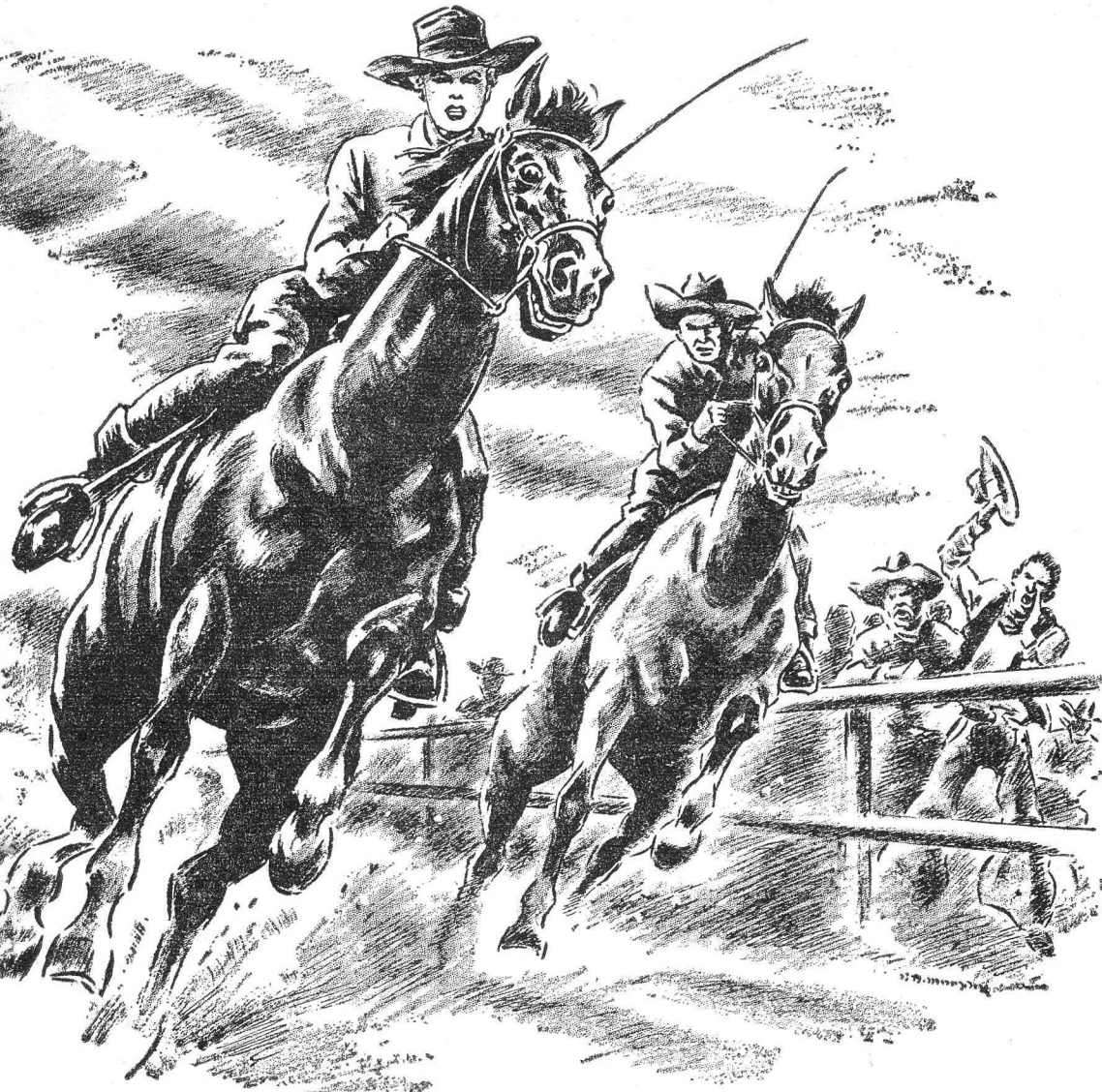
Sim raised up in the chair. He touched his brown face gingerly and switched around in the chair to look at himself. He reached a long hand over to the shelf in front of him and touched a bottle..

"Put some of that stuff on, too," he said, leaned back in his chair again, and went back to what he had been talking about. "Now don't say I didn't warn you. If you want to make some easy money, just lay it on Brown Betty."

The barber stopped shaking the bottle over Sim's curly black hair and said, "By golly, cowboy, she's got to be better'n she looks to beat Halliday's Moonbeam."

"She is," Sim declared, closing an eye at the line of cowhands and miners who were waiting their turn in the barber chair. "You be there." He got easily out of the chair and clamped a hat on his black head. His snapping black eyes went around the barber shop. "You boys want to get on something good, be out on the edge of town this afternoon and lay your

on HORSEBACK



They were not more than a hundred feet from the finish line

money on a winner."

A man with a quirt dangling from his wrist stood up and looked Sim Ryan over, his eyes running the length of the cowboy's frame and coming back to rest on his face. "A tramp," he sneered. "A tramp with a horse." He wheeled around and faced the barber shop crowd. "Any time a tramp comes in with a sure thing, watch out!"

Ryan grinned. "Watch your language, friend," he advised. "All I said was I got a horse that can run faster than any horse in this neck of the woods. If you see anything crooked in that, let's hear about it."

"Listen you, Joe Pompano," the barber said to the man with the quirt, shaking his razor at the flashily dressed cowhand, "you may be top-hand for Halliday, but in this shop I'm top dog. Now you want something, you keep buttoned up. You don't want nothing, light a shuck!"

THE man called Pompano shrugged. "I'm just trying to save you boys a few bucks," he said. "This man here has a sure thing, or he wouldn't talk like he does. Now I—"

"You say it some place else, Pompano." The barber took a step toward him, brandishing the razor.

But even as he moved, he froze suddenly, dropped the razor to his side, and bowed from the waist. A deep silence fell over the barber shop.

Ryan turned around—and opened his eyes and looked again. A girl stood in the doorway. There was a questioning look in her deep-blue, almost purple eyes. She put a hand to the little toque that inadequately covered ash-blond hair.

"Joe," she said to Pompano, "when you see Irv, tell him I've gone back to the ranch. I hear he's racing horses this afternoon and I don't want to spend half the night here, waiting." Her eyes rested on Ryan for a fraction of a second before she turned away.

"Yes'm," said Joe Pompano. "I'll tell him, Miss Karen."

Ryan suddenly felt panicky. In a moment this girl would be gone, would be out of his life forever, and yet he could have sworn he had seen something in her eyes he'd been looking for for at least five of his twenty-five years. She turned her head over her shoulder and looked levelly

at him, briefly, then she was gone.

A cowboy who had got into the chair Sim had vacated said, "Nobody bets against Halliday's horses around here, friend. If you're smart, you'll bet against your own horse."

Sim left the barber shop with the laughter of the crowd in his ears. He grinned. They'd see. That was what made this business profitable. Nobody believed Brown Betty could run.

He stopped beside the mare and ran his fingers down her long, ungainly neck, and she nipped at him playfully. He slapped her nose and went on down the street, a lithe, slim-built young fellow with the compact shoulders of a fighter and the easy movements of a panther.

He found his partner, Bern Weston, in the third saloon he looked in. He eased into a chair across the table from Bern, wondering what had happened to the big man who'd ridden trail with him from the Rockies westward to Nevada and up and down from Canada to Mexico. In all that time he'd never seen Bern Weston take a drink, let alone swig it down as he was doing now.

"Listen, Bern—" he leaned across the table—"this town's really loaded. I got a race on with a fellow named Halliday, and everybody in town thinks he's a leadpipe cinch. I'm going out there right now and begin taking bets. The race's at one this afternoon."

Bern Weston brought his two fists down on the table with a crash that tipped a quart bottle of Rock 'n Rye on its side. "Not interested, Sim," he said thickly.

"Not interested?" Sim brushed a big brown hand through black hair that refused to lay down even under the ministrations of the barber with his hair tonic. He sniffed his hand and wrinkled his nose, then got a cigar out of his pocket and bit off the end with his strong white teeth. He spat out the bit of tobacco and said, "Everybody's interested in making money, Bern."

Weston raised his glass and downed the fiery liquid. He made a wry face. "Not right now, I'm not, Sim," he mumbled. "Got a lead, Sim, and this is it. Sim, I know this is it." He took out his gun and laid it on the table. He tipped the bottle of whisky and shakily filled his glass until it overflowed. "I think maybe my looking

is about over, after all this time.

Sim half-raised out of his chair, lifted the gun, and slid it back into Weston's holster.

"What'd you find out, Bern?" he asked.

Bern Weston raised his bleary eyes to Sim. "I—I found—" He stopped and slapped the table top again. "Nev' mind, Sim. I don't want to talk about it right now. Got to think it out. Got to think it all out good and proper."

"Wait'll after the race," Sim urged. "Let's get out of here and have some fun and make some money, Bern. Then we'll think it out together."

WESTON looked cold sober for a moment. "Nothing don't matter with you, Sim, does it?" he asked. "Except having fun and making money."

"When you can get both at the same time," Sim Ryan said, grinning, "anybody'd be crazy not to like it."

"I don't like it and never did," declared Weston. "Two years, Sim, I been trailing along with you. You making money and having fun and me looking for a man. Now I think I've found him. So you run along with your end and make it pay."

"I always make it pay," Sim said good-naturedly. He got to his feet and leaned across the table. "You give me what money you got, and I'll bring you back double."

A short, red-faced man who had been listening with interest moved in closer. Sim looked at him stony-eyed, but the short man ignored him.

Weston stumbled to his feet. "No, Sim," he said thickly. "I can't mix anything else with what I'm going to do. We're going to split right now, Sim. My business takes over."

Sim said, "You'll be sober again."

He went across the room and out the door into the sunlight. A cool wind blew down the canyon outside the town, and Sim leaned against the porch post and looked at the Saturday traffic in the streets. A muleskinner, his pack animals loaded with ore from the mountains, skillfully herded his charges close along the board walk, his long blacksnake cracking like a sixgun. A freight wagon rumbled over the street and turned into the alley beside Dupre's General Store.

Except for Dupre's, a half dozen rooming houses, the big Parker House, the

saddlery and gun shop, a millinery store and an apothecary's next to the bank, the rest of the town of Canyon City was made up of dance halls and saloons. The streets teemed with rigs—surreys, buggys, buckboards, freight wagons—and with men on horseback. The board walks were crowded with housewives from either end of the one-street town, flashily dressed dance-hall girls from the teeming center, somberly clothed gamblers, red-shirted miners, and cowhands in their Saturday finery.

Sim Ryan chuckled. A busy town meant lots of money floating around. Where easy money flowed, Sim Ryan found the pickings easier. He raised his black eyes to the mountains towering above this town in Goldwater Canyon. Before him and behind him, they lifted threateningly into the air, starting from behind the buildings which stood face to face on the narrow street.

Ryan stepped to the board walk and moved leisurely toward the barber shop. The mare whinnied as he approached.

The barber called, "Give you five to three the Moombeam will take you."

Sim grinned. "You're in a hurry to lose your money, friend."

"Just wanted to get a piece of yours before it's gone," the barber explained.

Ryan said, "I'll hold it for you." He slipped the reins, stepped up into his saddle, and turned down the street.

Ryan slogged through the traffic which thinned out toward the lower end of town. Reaching the depot of the narrow-gauge railway, he pulled the mare up short. The mules that had just navigated the town were standing there while sacks of ore were being unloaded and thrown to the platform. A group of miners formed a grinning circle around the muleskinner whose blacksnake writhed, cracked and popped like something alive. An Indian boy stood stolidly while the muleskinner tried to make him dance.

"You can't handle *him*, Muley," chortled some man in the crowd.

"Dance, you mangy little devil!" grated the muleskinner. "Muley Dawson'll show you." The whip cracked within an inch of the boy's bare leg. "By Jupiter, I'll make you dance!" he snarled and the whip snaked out and curled around a thin brown leg.

Ryan put the mare through the crowd, scattering them. He got his hand on the whip as it fell again, jerked it from the man's hand.

Muley Dawson turned, surprise and anger on his brutal face. He said, "What the hell!" as the mare pushed against him.

RYAN made a turn on the whip around the skinner's neck and lifted the man off his feet. Dawson's face turned purple as he clawed at the choking whip. He gaged and gasped for breath and gurgled curses. Ryan dropped him in the street, but kept the whip.

"Used to use one of these myself," Ryan remarked. "But not on kids."

"Just a damned Injun," snarled the muleskinner, still on his knees, rubbing the raw red welt on his neck.

The whip curled out and down and cracked. Muley Dawson cried out and scuttled for the depot on hands and knees. The whip followed him relentlessly, wielded by an expert hand. The crowd roared.

Ryan tossed the whip after the muleskinner. He stood up in his stirrups.

"Men," he raised his voice to say, "this mare I'm forking will race anything on four legs down in the flats this afternoon."

"That skinner'd give her a tussle," a man bellowed, and the crowd bellowed, too.

"I got a jack'd do better'n your mare!" another voice yelled from the crowd.

The men were in a good humor after seeing Ryan's punishment of the muleskinner, and they laughed. They liked this big, good-natured, black-haired Irish cowboy, too.

"You going to ride her or she going to ride you?" queried another man. That was good for another laugh.

Ryan nodded, smiling, and looked around for the Indian boy. The lad had disappeared.

"I'm warning you all," he went on. "This mare's a runner. Never been beat. You want to make some money, lay it on her nose."

He turned the mare and rode down the canyon road with good-natured insults ringing in his ears.

He was satisfied. He'd given them a good look at Brown Betty and he was prepared to cover most of their bets. He had close to seventy-five hundred dollars in

the money belt around his lean middle. He thought of the seven thousand Bern Weston also carried and shook his head mournfully. This was the time for a killing, and Bern had to go get a lead to the man he'd been looking for all over the West. It wasn't the first time, either, Ryan remembered.

For more than two years, he reflected, he and Bern had been teamed up. He'd grown to like the big yellow-haired, easy-going puncher who kept looking so unceasingly for the man who'd talked his sister Ida into going away. Sim had heard so much about Ida that he'd come to regard her as someone he knew, rather than as a cause for vengeance. For Bern Weston had been riding the vengeance trail for two years, looking for a man who had bought a carload of blooded cattle in Ponca City, down in the Territory. That was all Weston knew about the man, except that he came from somewhere west of the Rockies. That was all he'd had to go on, but he'd never quit looking.

Anyhow, Sim and Bern Weston had teamed up. A black Irishman with a fast horse, a love of racing in his soul and a love of fun; and a somber, yellow-haired cowhand who was fast with a gun and who was looking for a man to kill.

Sim shrugged his big shoulders. Bern had had these moments before, he thought, but never to the extent of getting full of red-eye. Sim wondered what Weston had found out but shrugged that off, because he knew that when Bern sobered up, he'd get the story. Yeah, he'd get the story and then he could rag Bern for not getting his money on the line.

II

FIVE miles and two thousand feet below Canyon City, Sim Ryan broke out of the coolness of the rough canyon. The heat of the low valley hit him in the face as he looked back up the twisting turns of Goldwater Canyon, then took the wagon road to his left. When he reached a cluster of cottonwoods along a nearly dry creek, the noisy crowd there told him he had come to the right place.

An enterprising saloonkeeper from Canyon City had set up a rough bar of two unplanned boards resting on beer kegs. He and a helper, sweating profusely, dis-

pensed white liquor and foamy-headed warm beer over the makeshift counter. A hundred men milled about under the cottonwoods beneath which were some mounts hitched, and rigs staked out.

Ryan sat the mare for a few moments, looking over the lively crowd with rising satisfaction. His brown hand caressed the money-belt under his shirt. Dismounting, he pulled the saddle from the mare, led her down to the creek and let her drink sparingly. Returning, he got a currycomb and brush from his saddlebags and went to work. Slowly, as Sim worked, a crowd collected around him, commenting on the mare's points, most of which it was unanimously agreed were bad. Sim ignored their remarks and concentrated on getting a shine on the mare's ragged brown coat.

Finally someone ventured, "You ain't going to bet on *that*?" and muted murmur ran through the crowd.

Sim Ryan tossed the currycomb and brush on his saddle and turned. He reached a hand inside his shirt and unbuckled the moneybelt. He brought out the fat belt and said, "Who's going to hold the stakes?"

A white-goated man in a long-tailed black coat and derby hat was pushed to the front.

"Judge is your man," he was eagerly assured. "Judge Yates. He's your man!" A dozen voices chorused the name of Judge Yates.

"My name is Ryan, Sim Ryan," Sim said and offered his hand.

The judge removed a cigar from his mouth and shook Ryan's hand with a thin, almost transparent hand. "My duties," he said, "are somewhat removed from acting as stakeholder in a horse race." He added quickly, "But I'm glad to do it. I'm Judge Yates, young man, as you heard these men say, and I'm glad to know you."

The crowd, feeling the white liquor that was flowing freely, surged around the judge.

"Come on, Judge," a big miner growled, "let's get his money covered before he gets his eyeful of real horse."

"Yeah, man," drawled another. "I see Irv Halliday coming now. Hurry up and cover this here ten dollars of mine."

"Ten dollars?" The big miner spat. "Chicken feed. Me, I got five hundred!"

"Take it easy, boys, take it easy," Sim

murmured. "Everyone's going to be covered. The odds of three to one all right? That's what your barber quoted me and he looks like an honest man."

The big miner hesitated, scowled, then shoved his money at Judge Yates. "All right with me," he growled.

As fast as the judge could write out slips, men put their money up and Sim matched it at one to three. The judge gave receipts and the bettors drifted away, usually back to the makeshift bar, while others took their place. Sim Ryan was down to twenty-five hundred dollars in his money-belt when Irv Halliday arrived.

Halliday was a tall man, with steadiness and solidness indicated by the square lines of his plain face. That he was respected was evident by the manner in which the crowd stood aside for him, and by the friendliness of their glances, which were almost affectionate. Halliday shook hands with the judge and turned to look at Brown Betty. His face was inscrutable as he looked at the mare with a practised eye and ran his hands down her slender forelegs. Her muzzle came around and rubbed against the brown leather jacket he wore.

That gave Sim Ryan a warm feeling for the man. The mare didn't accept everyone. Sim was almost sorry when Halliday swung around with a triumphant look in his gray eyes.

"There's a difference of opinion here, mister," he said to Ryan, smiling, "but that's what makes horse races. How much?"

"Make it easy on yourself," Ryan said.

"You've got a nice horse," Halliday said. "But not in Moonbeam's class."

"We'll see," Sim said, smiling now. "I've got two thousand. The going odds are three to one, Halliday."

HALLIDAY'S smile was a little crooked. "Three to one, five to one," he said. "What does it matter? I like to see a man believe in something. My six thousand against your two. Winner take both horses."

The smile left Ryan's face. "I'd bet my wife," he said, "if I had a wife, before I'd stake this horse."

Halliday had the look of a man who doesn't find his way barred often. He said, "I see something in that mare I'd like to breed to. I'll put up eight thousand

against your two—and winner take both horses.”

“No,” Ryan said. He said it flatly and with finality.

“Ten thousand,” Halliday said, his mouth taking on a stubborn twist. “Ten thousand dollars, my friend.”

Ryan turned and walked away. He had a feeling that if he ever put up Brown Betty as a stake at any price that it would be the end of his luck. He went to the bar and bought a drink. It was a rare thing for him to do before a race. He stood there, undecided, with the drink in his hand, then tossed it off and turned away, making his way through the crowd. Then by the creek he saw the Indian boy he had defended, pushed on through the crowd and sauntered over there.

“You talk American?” Sim asked.

The boy gave him the briefest of nods. “I went to the mission school, sir,” he said. “My name is Thomas Block. My uncle is a chief of the Absorokas.”

“You like to watch the races, hey?” asked Ryan, sizing the boy up. He looked to weigh no more than a hundred, but his lean brown arms were well-muscled.

The Indian boy looked at him with immense brown eyes. He nodded, a bare tip of his black head.

“I need a rider,” Ryan said.

The boy was silent for a moment, studying the ground. Then he said, “You need a horse.”

“This one’ll do,” Ryan said brusquely. It was one thing for the men to josh him about his horse. Coming from the boy, it nettled him.

“I have a horse,” the boy said. “I own part of him. I captured this horse when he was a colt. I raised him myself and a good friend and I gentled him just right. My uncle gelded him at the right time. For you, for what you have done for me this day, I will let my horse run for you against Moonbeam.”

Ryan laughed and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. These Indian kids had a terrific imagination, he thought. He said, “You listen to me close, Tommy Block. You don’t have to do anything but stay aboard Brown Betty. Let her run the way she likes to run. That’s out in front of everything that’s moving. You do this for me, Tommy, and I’ll give you a double eagle.”

“I’ll do it for nothing,” said Tommy Block, “then we’ll be even.”

Ryan looked at the skinny Indian boy and laughed, poking him with a hard finger. “You’re a funny kid, Tommy,” he said, “I think we’re going to get along all right.”

Someone was shouting through cupped hands over near the bar.

“The race will start in five minutes! The race will start in five minutes!”

“All right, kid,” Ryan said. He went over to the mare and slipped her reins. “On you go, Tommy. Bareback. Remember what I said—just let her run.”

He boosted Tommy Block on the mare. Brown Betty was beginning to tremble and prance. Ryan laughed and rubbed her nose affectionately.

“Know what’s up, don’t you, girl?” he whispered, and the mare lifted her head and danced away. Ryan looked up at Tommy Block. “She’s all yours, boy. For a few minutes.”

At the starting line, Ryan found himself beside Irv Halliday. The big man took out his sixgun and spun the cylinder. He looked at Ryan as he ejected two spent shells, slipped two more from his belt loop, and inserted them in the chambers.

“Took a shot at a jack coming over,” he explained.

Ryan looked at the Halliday stallion as the big-chested roan came up to the starting line on his back feet. The hunch-backed rider cuffed him down with his hat and Halliday called out a warning.

Brown Betty stood quietly, seemingly lethargic, but Ryan knew she was coiled like a spring.

“Ready—set!” Halliday bellowed, the cocked gun held over his head.

He pulled the trigger and the two horses were off together.

THE crowd roared, the sound lifting on the dry, thin air and wafting out into the simmering valley. Ryan felt exultation in watching the brown horse level out, her belly seemingly sweeping the ground, running effortlessly, like a faultless machine, with Tommy Block, a clinging burr between her smoothly functioning forequarters and the powerful, spring-coiled hindquarters.

She pulled steadily away from the stallion and the crowd suddenly was quiet.



Pompano fell amid a welter of food and dishes

The only sound was their heavy breathing, a groan and a cough here and there, the honk of a nose being blown, and the clatter of tin cups at the makeshift bar.

Around the far turn, the mare pulled steadily away, while the hunch-back rider of the stallion desperately plied his whip. In the home stretch, Brown Betty was far ahead, crossing the finish line a full ten lengths ahead of Moonbeam.

The crowd's breath was expelled as one man. A tremendous shout broke the air. Dazed men were aware that they'd witnessed an amazing performance, and then came the realization that they'd lost, and a might groan split the air.

Halliday alone was unperturbed. He grinned slightly. "I'd like to have that mare," he said. "She's a machine. A running machine. She's the best—"

Joe Pompano pushed Halliday aside and faced Ryan. "She ain't the same horse I looked at in town!" he snarled. "You pulled a switcheroo!"

The crowd fell silent and drew back sud-

denly, those in the rear being shoved roughly back by the men around Ryan and Pompano.

Ryan laughed, his laughter alone breaking the deep silence. Everyone says that," Ryan said. "But I have no other horse. I ride the mare and she runs for me, too."

"You're a liar!" Pompano said. "You're a liar and a crook, Ryan!"

The smile left Ryan's face. Red flared up his neck and his nostrils twitched. He looked at the faces surrounding him. In them were doubt and belief, a curious mixture. He wheeled around, the flush of anger red on his face.

"You're a poor loser, Pompano," he said. "If you'll take off your coat or fill your hand we'll settle this now."

The crowd moved back.

Pompano tossed the quirt hanging from his wrist into the air. He grasped the small end of the leather. Swinging this, he stepped forward and swung viciously at Ryan's head.

The weighted handle whistled through

the air. Too late, Ryan threw up his hand.

The buckshot-loaded handle landed against his wrist. He felt the bone crack and unbearable pain shot through his arm. He whipped a swift hard left at Pompano but it never reached the snarling face. The quirt handle landed across the side of Ryan's head and a world of stars and lights exploded inside his head.

III

A MOON was peeping down at Ryan when he woke up with a knot on his head. There was a taste of blood in his mouth and a sickish feeling at his stomach. He lay there for the space of a few heartbeats, looking up at the quarter circle of bright yellow, feeling the wind that stirred the cottonwoods above him.

A curious grinding sound came to him. He rolled over. Brown Betty was grazing near him. His sigh of relief filled the night. He still had his horse.

On his belly on the ground he tried to rise, and groaned with the pain that filled his head and body. On his hands and knees, his head hanging, he groaned again. Above him, in the near reaches of the rocks, the chittering note of a prowling mountain lion reached his ears. Brown Betty snorted and danced away a few steps. Ryan shuddered as something cool slipped across his neck. He sat back on his heels, biting off a groan as he lifted his right hand. His wrist was swollen, and he couldn't move the joint.

Tommy Block asked, "How do you feel, Mr. Ryan?" and dropped his hand from Ryan's neck to his side.

Ryan groaned again, tasting the blood from his cracked lip.

The Indian boy said, "You come with me—to my uncle's wickiup. Until you feel like riding."

Ryan struggled to his feet. "No, Tommy," he said. He stood there swaying, then walked a step and leaned against the mare. "Now," he said, "I'm all right."

Tommy Block silently stepped to his side and thrust a slip of paper into Ryan's hand. "The judge, he asked me to give you this. Good luck, white man." He was gone.

Ryan shoved the scrap of paper into his pocket and with his left hand lifted his sad-

dle to the mare's smooth back. He cinched it awkwardly, then climbed into the saddle and turned the mare toward Goldwater Canyon. He slumped over the horn, clinging with his left hand, nausea coming to him at intervals.

The Goldwater Canyon road was deserted. Ryan too, felt deserted and helpless as the mare picked her way up the winding turns with care, seeming to sense that Ryan was in bad condition.

"Good girl," Ryan murmured. That was the way it was when a man roamed around the country. Takes time to make friends, he thought. And a man without friends can figure on doing for himself come hell or high water.

The mare came at last to the lower reaches of town. The lights and noise roused Ryan. He urged the mare along when the brown horse tried to turn in at Burton's livery. He went on through the one-street town, the yellow light and loud music spilling out at him, the raucous laughter biting on his nerves, making his aching head throb.

Ryan left the mare tied at the Parker House rail and climbed the outside stairs to his room. He lighted the lamp on the dresser and looked around the room. Bern Weston wasn't there.

Ryan washed his face, peeling the crust-ed blood off with his fingers. He examined the cut across the side of his head above his ear. The skin had been laid open and the wound had accumulated bits of dirt and leaves and pieces of debris where his head touched the ground. He tried to cleanse it, but working with one hand, he couldn't. And the pain in his arm was intense.

His right wrist was red and swollen and he couldn't use his hand. The wrist throbbed, and hotness coursed through his arm all the way to his shoulder.

Ryan brought out the note Tommy Block had given him. It stated in a fine Spencerian hand that Judge Yates was holding his money in his office. He sighed with relief. At least he had that for his pain—and he had his fast horse.

He went out and down the corridor and descended to the lobby. The leather-covered chair and sofa were empty. An elderly man with a thin face seemingly lost in a high collar sat on a stool behind the desk, nodding.

Ryan asked, "Where can I find Judge Yates?"

The ancient clerk jerked erect. He lifted a pince nez and clamped the glasses to his thin nose. "Ah, Judge Yates lives here. His suite is on the top floor, Mr. Ryan. Four-o-three." He looked at the wall clock, then pulled a huge turnip-shaped watch from his pocket and compared clock and watch silently for a full minute. "The judge, sir," he went on then, "has his nightcap in the hotel bar next door at five to ten. Which is now. At exactly ten o'clock he comes through that door and goes to his room. At ten of five—" He stopped as Ryan strode across the room and pushed open the door that led from the lobby to the bar.

THE hotel bar was small, luxuriously furnished. The mahogany bar, short and rounding at each end, gleamed dully under the glinting lights of the huge chandelier, which was reflected in the big back-bar mirror. Deeply upholstered leather chairs lined the wall. In the space between the wall and the bar were a few green-covered poker tables, which were filled. The genteel element gathered in the Parker House Bar.

Judge Yates stood at one end of the bar talking to a well-dressed man who might be a mine-owner or banker. The hum of conversation died in the room as Ryan made his way toward the judge.

Ryan stood silently behind the judge, waiting. The judge turned slowly and said, "Won't you join us, Mr. Ryan? This is our banker, Estes Moses. Estes, Mr. Sim Ryan."

"Pardon me for not offering my hand, Mr. Moses," Ryan said. "Not drinking to-night, Judge. I came for my money."

The judge took a quick sip from his glass. "Deplorable incident, Ryan. I'm sorry. Truly sorry. Your money? It's locked in my safe, Ryan. Come with me." He finished his drink, bowed to the banker who maintained a tight-lipped silence, and motioned for Ryan to follow.

Ryan gave the banker a cool glance and followed the judge.

Going through the lobby the judge called to the clerk, "Harry, find Doc Frazee and send him to my rooms at once. You'll find him playing chuckaluck at the Pine Tree."

"Yes, sir, Judge, yes sir, right away, sir," Harry was scurrying out the door while he talked.

"Feel all right?" the judge panted solicitously when he and Ryan paused for a third floor landing. His breath was short and he apologized, "Not as young as I used to be."

"I'll last out," Ryan said, "until I get my money."

Inside the judge's rooms, the older man made Ryan sit in a comfortable chair while he went to his desk, opened a drawer, and lifted a bottle, shaking it lightly. He turned with the bottle and glass in his hand. He poured Ryan a stiff drink.

"I think you'll need this, Ryan," he said. "If I'm not mistaken you've got a broken wrist. And that head looks bad."

Ryan downed the drink and the judge sat down in a chair across from him. The judge's ancient blue eyes twinkled as he said, "I hope you'll forgive an old man's whims, Ryan. You see, I've followed a sedate profession all my life as a civil lawyer. I came out here several years ago for my health. Improved, too. Never felt better in my life. Taking a new interest in things." He got up, walked to the window, and raised it. The cool mountain air poured into the room. The judge turned with childlike animation. "You can reach out and almost touch the mountain," he said.

Ryan set his glass carefully on the table beside him and said, "Judge, I came for my money."

A shade of annoyance crossed the judge's face. "Relax, man!" he exploded. "That's the only thing about you I don't like, Ryan. You're too much for the money. Otherwise you're something every old man needs to brush with now and then. I wish I'd led a life you. A roving buccaneer. That's it! A pirate on horseback." The judge cackled loudly.

"I come by my money honestly," Ryan said. "I told all of them before the race I had a horse that couldn't be beat. No one believed me. That's how I make ends meet."

The judge chuckled. "Comfortably, comfortably. You made twenty-one thousand dollars today, young man. But hang onto it. Halliday won't take this beating lying down. He's on his way to Denver right now to buy a horse. To beat your

Brown Betty. And he might do it, too."

Ryan grinned suddenly, his suspicions of the old judge dissipating. He liked the old legal light. "That's the horse to find," he said. "And not in this country, Judge."

The judge raised his head as someone tapped on the door. "Come in, Doc," he called, and the door opened. A thin, anemic, sallow-faced man walked in. He carried a black bag in his hand. He smelled of disinfectant.

"Doctor Frazee, Ryan," the judge said courteously.

The doctor nodded impatiently. "I was ahead for once," he growled. "What's it this time?"

JUDGE YATE'S white brows went up. "You're an uncouth butcher, Frazee," he said in the same tone of voice as before. "It's too bad the town hasn't a good horse doctor to replace you. It'd be an improvement."

Frazee flushed darkly and turned to Ryan, who lifted his hand, showing the swollen wrist.

"And look at his head, too, while you're about it," the judge said.

Frowning, Frazee examined Ryan's arm, moving the hand back and forth. Ryan bit his lips to still a cry of pain. He clenched his teeth as Frazee worked on the arm.

"Give him a drink," Frazee said to the judge. "This wrist is broken, and I'll have to set it."

The judge brought the bottle. Ryan waved it away.

"Just give me a bullet," he said.

The judge slipped a shell from Ryan's shell belt and placed the lead pellet between Ryan's teeth.

Frazee went to work immediately, pulling the break apart and letting the bones mesh, while he worked them into place. Sweat streamed from his yellow forehead, and his mouth worked.

Ryan bit into the lead and his big body slumped in the chair. Sweat oozed from his forehead and ran down into his eyes. His breath came in great sucking gasps. Frazee cursed as he worked.

The room swam before Ryan's eyes and as his left hand gripped the chair arm, his fingers bit into the wood until blood started around his nails. He spat as the brass shell clattered to the floor, spitting out the

piece of lead. He breathed deeply and tried to relax.

The doctor stepped back. "Don't move it," he warned. He got splints from the black bag and placed them on Ryan's arm and bandaged it tightly. Finally he made a sling from Ryan's neckerchief and slung the arm at the right angle, adjusting it to Ryan's comfort.

Ryan said, "I'll have that drink now."

The judge gave him a water glass filled almost to the top, and Ryan drained it.

"Now for the head," said Frazee.

He was rough in taking the stitches and the wound started bleeding again. But he was thorough and when he was through Ryan was near exhaustion. Through pain and whiskey-dulled eyes, he watched the doctor pack his bag and scuttle from the room.

The judge said, "How do you feel, Ryan, about the man who did this?"

Ryan shook his head dully. "I always run into someone who takes losing hard," he said. "You meet 'em everywhere."

Judge Yates shook his white head. "Joe Pompano is a bad actor. He's killed several men. One with the quirt he used on you."

"I'm just out to make some money," Ryan said, "and have some fun. I like to race. You give me the money and I'll be going, Judge."

"You're in no shape to travel, Ryan, believe me."

"The mare's outside. I've got to put her away."

"I'll send Harry for the stableman," Judge Yates said, but Ryan got to his feet.

"No," he said sharply. "I'll take care of her." His hat wouldn't fit over the white bandage around his head. He perched it on top. "Where's my money?"

The judge stood by his desk, his head down. "I'll get it for you at once," he said.

"Never mind," Ryan said thickly. "Maybe you better keep it for me. I'll be back." He swayed to the door.

The mare was waiting patiently in front of the Parker House. Ryan jerked the reins loose and led the animal down the street and turned it at the livery. He went back through the darkness until he found Brown Betty's stall. He stripped her down, letting the saddle fall on the ground, with not enough spirit left to lift it to the partition.

HE FOUND a bucket and brought a measure of grain from the feed room and dumped it into the feed box. When he snapped the box chain into her hackamore and stood outside the stall, nausea was in him again. Quickly he squatted to keep from falling, and leaned his shoulders against the box stall. The munching sound of Brown Betty consuming oats came to him and more distantly the sounds of revelry ringing up the canyon walls. A deep melancholy descended on him. Suddenly it seemed to him that this was too big a price to pay for the fun of racing, even considering the money he had won. He sat there in the darkness with sweat oozing out of every pore, until gradually the sickish feeling passed. Getting to his feet then, he went toward the square of light that was the stable entrance.

He stumbled over something soft and yielding, landing on his left hand and both knees in the accumulation of droppings and hay. The strong smell of nitrogen mingled with that of sweat and another peculiar odor that made Ryan's skin crawl.

He found a match, his heart thudding

against his ribs as he dragged his thumb-nail over the match head. Yellow light flared, and died quickly in the airless barn. But in that momentary flash of light he saw the pallor of Bern Weston's face. And the great blob of dark stain on his trail partner's shirt front!

IV

RYAN'S good left hand explored Weston's chest. When he felt the faint stirring of a heart beat he tried to lift Weston, but was too weak. He went up to the front of the stable, beat on the office door, and shouted.

A slit of light appeared at the bottom of the door, then a tousle-haired man opened it, holding a lantern shoulder high. His gray-black whiskers glinted in the light. He dug at his sleepy eyes.

"My partner's back here," Ryan said. "He's been hurt. Can you give me a hand?"

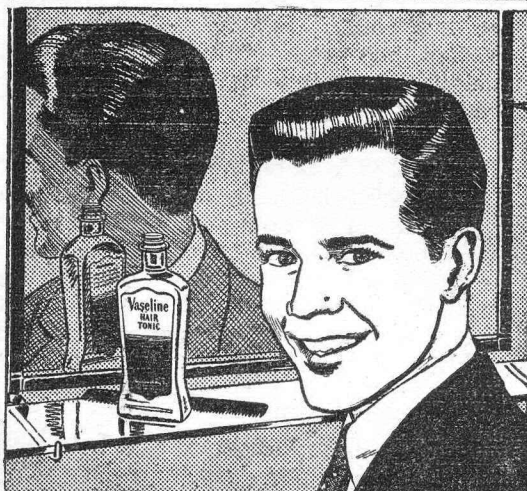
The sleepy-eyed man said, "Yeah, sure," and yawned.

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



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Ryan, hating him for his disinterest, said, "Dammit, hurry up!"

The man's eyes opened wider and he stopped in the middle of another yawn. "Sure," he said. He came out then, went back along the row of stalls and held the lantern over Weston.

"Hey, this man's been shot!" he said

"Well, dammit, pick him up!" Ryan said. "I've got a broken wrist."

The stableman squatted beside Bern Weston. "Won't do no good," he said. "He's dead."

Ryan pushed the stableman aside and knelt beside Weston. He put his ear against Weston's chest. He couldn't feel or hear anything, even when he put his face down close to Weston's searching for a breath of life. There was a little—just the feeblest stirring, for Weston's whisper reached him then. Ryan strained to hear.

"Tur— Turkey Track, Sim. I— I—"

He stiffened, then relaxed all over. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly at the wisps of hay hanging through the boards of the hayloft. They were dull eyes, shedding no reflecting light.

Ryan thought dispassionately of the two years he'd lived and ridden with this man. The one prime object in Bern Weston's life for every moment of those two years had been to find the man who'd ruined his sister. That had filled his morose days and, probably, his dream-filled nights. It had motivated his every action. And it had brought him—what?

Ryan asked himself that question as he stood there in a smell-ridden stable, beside a yawning, disinterested stableman, and the melancholy that had gripped him was intensified.

He squatted again, pulling Weston's shirt open. The yellow-haired cowhand had been shot twice, the purple-rimmed holes from which the thin rivulet of blood no longer pulsed spaced close together. Ryan leaned over further, tugging at Weston's gunbelt. The holster was empty.

Immediately Ryan searched all around Weston's body, looking for the gun. The stableman yawned again, still disinterested.

Ryan got up and stood before the stableman. "You Burton?" he asked.

"Yeah," the man said.

"You hear any shots tonight?"

"I hear 'em every night," Burton said.

"Everybody that's not deaf hears 'em, too."

"I mean back here," Ryan said impatiently.

Burton shook his head. "Can't tell where a shot comes from in this town," he said. "Them canyon walls are too close together here."

Ryan asked, "What's Turkey Track?"

The stableman looked at Ryan in the middle of a yawn. "Turkey Track? Why, that's Irv Halliday's spread. Out in Turkey Track Basin. . . ."

The Turkey Track buildings lay in an elbow of the Bear River as that ribald stream gushed out of the mountains, milky with the melted ice of a glacier, twelve thousand feet above. Sim Ryan dismounted above the ranch and sat moodily on a rock, warmed by a sterile spring sun as the mare cropped noisily around his feet.

The main ranch house, a long rambling stone structure, was perched on a knoll overlooking the river on three sides. All around were towering pines, and below the knoll was a bunkhouse, which evidently also housed the kitchen. Black smoke plumed up from a lean-to at the rear. Beyond that was the round corral, and a big high steep-roofed barn. Brown winter hay bulged from the upper loading door. A checkerboard of fenced green grass spread over the valley to the swell of the first turkey claw.

Turkey Track Basin was shaped like a turkey track, with the ranch lying in the hub, or palm, and with lush valleys, five of them, branching out toward the intervening ridges covered with good straight-trunked cedar. Neat wire fences crisscrossed the mouths of the various valleys, making the whole layout a cattleman's dream.

LOOKING back on the past twenty-four hours, Ryan tried to piece together the fragments of information he had. The short, burly, red-faced man who had been in the saloon and had listened so intently to Ryan's conversation with Bern the night before the race had been the sheriff, Lem Ashley. Ashley had made it plain to Ryan that he, Ryan, was his first suspect as Bern Weston's killer.

The sheriff had admitted that he'd seen Bern Weston with a dance hall girl a short time before he'd seen Ryan and Weston

talking in the bar. He hadn't known the girl's name, but she was a tall, yellow-haired girl who worked in the Pine Tree.

The stableman, Jed Burton, had told Ryan he'd seen Weston go in and out of the barn several times just before dark, but thought he'd been looking after his horse. He couldn't recall hearing any shots from the barn, but as he'd said before, that didn't mean anything, because he heard shots all during the night every Saturday night, and sometimes through the week when some of the boys up at the mine had to lay off on account of a flooded drift or something like that.

Invariably, Ryan's thoughts came back to Irv Halliday. He tried to visualize Irv Halliday as a seducer of women, but the picture wouldn't fit. If Irv Halliday were the man Bern Weston had been looking for, Bern must have made a mistake, Sim concluded. The ranchman was handsome and rich. He had a likeable personality. He appeared to be honest. There was every reason in the world to think that Bern must have been wrong.

Yet why had Bern whispered the words "Turkey Track," as he had, with his last mortal breath?

Irv Halliday, Ryan had learned, was the man who had built the Turkey Track into the imposing layout it was. He had secured title to the five valleys, one by one, from small cattlemen who gave in to his big price and persuasive talk. He had grown, Haliday had, and in growing had left a good taste in every small rancher's mouth.

These were some of the things Ryan had learned. But he was no avenger, and his fervent desire was to take his mare and resume his wanderings. Yet now there was a difference. Something was gone from the old life, something vital was missing, and Ryan sensed that it was here in this outwardly peaceful valley. He had to do something here for Bern—and Ida.

You couldn't live with a man night and day for two years, he thought, without some of that man's dreams and motives rubbing off on you. Ryan sighed, got to his feet, and stepped into saddle. He rode downward, the mare scrabbling catlike down the barely-marked trail.

He came suddenly to the flatlands and angled across the five-strand barbwire fence set on good cedar posts. Cutting

across a meadow through knee-high Johnson grass, he saw the irrigation ditches from the river that kept the valleys green.

Dismounting, he opened a gate and led the mare through. He put the wire hoop over the gate post again and walked on toward the ranch house, leading the mare. Suddenly he stopped, his heart pounding as he caught sight of the red and white shorthorns grazing inside a pen. The animals were all big, good-looking bulls, branded with the Y Bar W of Ponca City! The bulls looked to be about four years old. That would make it just right, Ryan thought dully. For it had been just four years ago that the man Bern had sought so ceaselessly had bought that carload of blooded cattle in Ponca City.

He had heard the story a hundred times around a hundred campfires, across a hundred bars from Bern Weston, and yet this was the first evidence he'd actually seen that any such blooded bulls existed outside the Y Bar W of Ponca City.

He watched the placidly grazing animals, and his mind turned back to the small ranch in Oklahoma Territory—the Strip, Bern had called it—and to the two partners, Yancy and Waters, who owned it. They specialized in the shorthorn beef animals that were replacing the longhorns so rapidly. Bern had been ramrodding the spread, and his sister Ida had lived in the little cabin provided for the foreman. She had been gone one night, leaving a note to explain her new-found happiness. She'd write to Bern, she'd said, but she never had. Neither Waters nor Yancy could tell Bern anything about the man she had gone with, except that he had bought cattle. They'd sold on a cash basis and had given him a general bill of sale. All they knew was that the fellow had said he was shipping the cattle west, beyond the Rockies.

BERN had followed the trail of the man and the cattle to Denver. That was where he and Ryan had met. They'd gone on together from there.

"Once I find them steers," Bern had always declared, "I'll find my man—and know him."

Well, here were the steers—Sim Ryan was sure of it. Bern had found his man—and death, too.

Ryan walked on, leading the mare. His head was whirling, for as he faced the facts it was hard to believe them. It was hard to believe a man of Halliday's apparent caliber could be guilty of seduction and murder.

Still, Ryan asked himself, what did he know about the real Halliday? How could he or anybody look at a man and say he was thus or so?

There's one way to get to Halliday, he thought grimly. There's one way he can be hurt. Hit him in the pocketbook. Take all his money, take his land, take his cattle, and leave him penniless. Leave him nothing.

He went on toward the big rambling house on the knoll, overlooking the river, and his thoughts left him with a deeper melancholy than he'd ever known. Such revenge could offer him little, could offer even less for the dead Bern and for Ida, wherever she might be.

He felt a little contempt for himself for not facing up to Halliday, man to man. He wished more than anything else for the happy and carefree days he had always known, when he could look forward to another day, another town, new faces—and another race.

At the end of the winding road Ryan ground-anchored the mare, walked up onto the porch, and rapped on the massive door with its turkey track in brass studs. He waited a full minute and hammered on the door again.

A cool voice from the other side of the house said, "Yes?"

Ryan turned, instantly recognizing the voice, his heart bouncing up into his throat. He lifted his hat from its resting place on the white bandage.

"I'm looking for Mr. Halliday," he said.

She came up on the porch. She wore gloves and carried a trowel and there was a smudge of dirt on her ivory and gold cheek. "He's in Denver," she said. "I don't know when he'll be back. You're Ryan, aren't you?"

He nodded coldly.

"Irv'll never rest till he beats you," she declared. She came closer, her eyes on his arm. "I'm so sorry about that. But Joe Pompano's done that before, and he'll do it again. I've warned Irv about him."

"He's a loyal employee," Ryan said. "Probably was looking out for his boss's

interests."

She looked at him sharply. "You asking me, Ryan, or telling me?"

He moved his big shoulders. "Forget it," he said.

"No," she said, facing him squarely. "Irv doesn't have anything to do with Pompano except when he's working. He wasn't working Saturday."

Ryan said again, "Forget it."

"All right," she agreed. "But don't go looking for Pompano. He's quick with that quirt—and quicker with a gun."

"I wasn't thinking about it," he said, grinning a little.

She said, "I don't know why that irks me but it does, Ryan. Don't tell me you're one of those turn-the-other-cheek tribe."

He looked away, across the river. "I like fun," he said. "It's no fun to fight—with your guns or your fists. I've done both."

"And no taste for it, eh?" She smiled crookedly, and Ryan was reminded of Halliday. "I feel responsible for you, Ryan. You're in no shape to float around the country. You want to see Irv, so put up here till he gets back."

She was as sure of herself as Irv, Ryan thought, and didn't know if he liked that or not. He moved his head, "Thanks," he said drily. "I'll put myself under your protection."

She said unsmilingly, "I'll send Wing to show you your room."

She turned and went along the porch. Her shoulders were wide and straight and her back flat. Her waist curved in, and her hips flared out.

V

WATCHING the girl, Ryan got an unaccustomed feeling in the pit of his stomach that sank into his groin as he watched. His fingers tingled and sensuousness possessed him. He sat down on the edge of the porch, got a cigar from his shirt pocket, bit the end off and spat it out. He placed the cigar in his mouth, worked it around and chewed it without lighting it, a faroff look in his eye. He sat there until a light footstep aroused him. He twisted around.

A pigtailed Chinese said, "Miss Karen say me show you. I do! Come!"

Halliday's got it good, Ryan thought, as he followed the Chinese down a wide cool

corridor inside the house. If things work out the way I plan I'll keep this Chinese.

That would give him a feeling of luxury, of elegance, he decided. But he still thought of Karen Halliday's swinging hips, her ivory and gold complexion, her full mouth and her blue, almost purple eyes. He sighed. Too bad she didn't go with the ranch. But when he cut Halliday's throat, that would finish him with her, anyway, even if he ever had a chance with her. He grinned wryly.

His room looked out over the river and gave him a view of the five valleys with their intervening wooded ridges. He stood at the window for a long time after the Chinese catfooted out. His wide brow was furrowed with perplexed lines and he frowned often. He didn't like himself any too well at that moment. But, he reminded himself, what he had to do was for Bern. For Bern and Ida. . . .

Irv Halliday arrived at Turkey Track on the same day, and at the same time the sheriff drove over from Canyon City in his buggy. The big rancher swung down from a sweat-streaked mount as the sheriff

drew up an ill-matched pair in front of the ranch and wrapped his reins around the buggy whip.

From his chair on the end of the porch, unobserved, Ryan watched them and listened to them.

"Howdy, Irv," the red-faced sheriff said. "Just getting in?"

Halliday stretched and loosened his cinches and swung around. "Man, did I have a trip! But by hell, I've got a horse, Lem. A real horse, what I mean. Nothing like it around here, not even that brown crowbait of Ryan's that runs like a streak of greased lightning."

"That feller Ryan staying with you?" Lem Ashley asked cautiously.

Halliday's face took on a remote look. "Staying with me?" he asked, and Ryan could see him collecting his thoughts. "I been away, Lem. I didn't know. Last I saw of Ryan, that Indian was looking after him and daring anybody to touch him. Pompano's going too far one of these days."

"Then you didn't hear about this other feller?" Lem queried.

[Turn page]



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Halliday raised his voice and the Chinese came out. "Wing, round up somebody at the bunkhouse to take care of this horse. . . . Here, you lead him down there."

The Chinese stood as far from the horse as the reins would reach. He walked ahead, looking apprehensively over his shoulder.

Halliday said, "Come on up out of this sun, Lem. I didn't know what you're talking about."

Slick, thought Ryan, damn slick. If I didn't know better I'd think he was telling the truth.

The two men sat on the edge of the porch and Lem Ashley filled a burned pipe bowl and tamped tobacco down with a stubby finger, while Halliday rolled a cigarette. Ashley held a light for Halliday, then sucked his pipe afire.

"Yeah, this man Ryan's partner," Ashley said then. "Somebody killed him in Burton's livery. Don't know who done it. This Ryan tells me the feller—Weston was the name—had near seven thousand in a money-belt. Wasn't on him. And his gun was missing. Ain't found it yet."

"Got any ideas?" Halliday was casual.

Ryan tensed, sensing that Halliday's casualness was forced.

"Well, ain't got nothing to go on," Ashley said, "but I figure maybe this partner of Weston's knows more about it than he lets on."

"Him?" Halliday snorted. "Strictly a Good-time Charley, Lem. Wouldn't have the guts to step on a tarantula."

Ryan's face burned. So that's what Halliday thought of him. Maybe that was what the girl, Karen thought, too, but she hadn't acted that way during his few days at the ranch. He half-raised, then sank back into his chair.

ASHLEY was speaking again. "I don't know, Irv. You can't just look at a man and tell what he is and what he ain't. I been sheriffling long enough to learn that, if I ain't learned much else."

"You can rest easy on that," snorted Halliday. "This man Ryan's a feather-weight if I ever saw one. I don't hold with Pompano for breaking him up the way he did, but if Ryan was half a man Joe'd never have got away with it. Ryan's built for taking care of himself, but he's gutless, and that's why he got hurt."

"Maybe so, maybe so," muttered Ash-

ley, shaking his head doubtfully. "I talked to that yellow-haired gal that works in the Pine Tree. She's a friend of Pompano's. She said Weston bought her a drink and that's all she knows. Just ain't got no idea where to turn, Irv. Thought maybe I'd drive out here and ask Ryan some more questions. Heard he was here."

"Well, I'll see if he's around," Irv said, frowning. "Maybe Karen put him on, but she don't usually do any hiring." He raised his voice. "Hey, Karen! You home?"

Ryan raised up in his chair, rubbing his eyes. Both men turned to stare. "You call?" Jim asked and stood up. "I sat down here and must've gone to sleep."

Karen stepped out on the porch. "Hello, Irv. When did you get in? Didn't expect you for another week."

Halliday looked from his sister Karen to Ryan and tossed away his cigarette, his face a study.

Karen Halliday said, "I asked Ryan to stay here until he's able to get around. Joe—"

"Of course, of course," said Halliday. He turned to Ryan. "This is Sheriff Ashley, Ryan. He wants to ask you some questions about murder." He looked hard at Ryan for a moment, then stepped up on the porch. "Come on, Karen," he said grimly.

His sister followed him into the house, and the massive door closed on them.

Lem Ashley said, "Ain't there something else you can tell me, Ryan?"

Ryan took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said, "sure, Sheriff. I know who killed Bern Weston."

Lem Ashley blinked. "Who?"

"Irv Halliday," Ryan told him coolly.

Ashley didn't miss a puff on his pipe. "You're crazy," he said.

"My mental state has nothing to do with it," Ryan said.

"Meaning what?" Ashley puffed.

"Meaning maybe I'm crazy and maybe I'm not—but Halliday's still the one. And I'll prove it when the time comes."

"Man, you're asking for trouble," Ashley said. "You're opening the door and inviting it in. And I don't mind telling you I think you're a dog."

"Because I'm telling you what I know?" asked Ryan with amusement.

"No. Breaking bread with a man—at least in his home—and talking like you're

doing," Ashley said sourly.

"All right, then," Ryan said. "I'll tell you what I know."

He filled in Lem Ashley with everything he knew about Bern Weston and his search for vengeance. He wound up by telling the sheriff that something had happened in Canyon City that had made Bern believe he'd discovered something. Ryan now believed that Bern had found out about the Y Bar W Herefords on the Turkey Track. Somehow or other, Halliday had got wind of it and had shot Weston to insure his own safety and to keep his good name unsullied.

And all the while he talked, Lem Ashley shook his head.

"No," said the lawman. "I've known Jim Halliday fifteen, twenty year. He ain't that kind."

"What about those two shells?" asked Ryan. "Halliday stood right beside me and started the race. He shook two empties out of his gun."

"Weston was alive after that," Ashley said. "Jed Burton said he saw him in and out of his lively stable after the race."

"He could be lying," said Ryan. "Or he could be honestly mistaken. As far as I'm concerned, Halliday's the man."

Ashley looked at him keenly. "What're you hanging around here for, then? Why don't you brace him, Ryan?"

"I don't work that way," Ryan said. "I'll do it my way and in good time."

"You know something, young feller?" Ashley asked, as he knocked the dottle from his pipe. "I kind of think maybe Halliday is right about you." He turned and stalked to his buggy, climbed up on the seat, and unwound his reins. He shook his whip at Ryan. "You got a heap of figuring to do, Sim Ryan," he said, and drove away.

RYAN watched the buggy as it dipped down the knoll, the shadows of the horses, man and buggy long in the afternoon sun. The triangle down by the bunkhouse jangled. Ryan lifted his arm and shook it, then turned and walked down the hill toward the bunkhouse. His face was hard and his black eyes cold.

A dozen Turkey Track hands were seated around the table. Joe Pompano sat at the head with both elbows outspread, wolfing his food. Slowly the talk died

as Ryan walked the length of the table. When he reached Pompano's side, only the sound of Pompano chewing his food broke the silence.

"Hello, Joe," Ryan said gently. No one but Pompano was eating.

Pompano raised his dark head, and looked up quickly, expectantly, wiping his mouth along the length of his shirt sleeve from elbow to wrist, finishing up with his fingers.

"Still got the quirt, Joe?" Ryan asked, his voice still soft and easy.

He reached swiftly with his left hand and lifted the quirt from the floor where it lay beside Pompano's chair. Pompano made a stab for his gun and Ryan hit him across the shoulder with the loaded butt of the quirt. The sound was loud and ugly. Pompano gagged, paralyzed. Ryan struck his hand that was still wrapped around his gun belt. Pompano staggered to his feet, gagging, his wild eyes wild.

Ryan slammed him in the belly with the quirt and Pompano doubled. Then Ryan lifted Pompano's gun with a quick motion and threw it against the chuckhouse wall. He moved in, deliberately brought the quirt down on Pompano's wrist, and the thud and crack of bone was plainly audible. Joe Pompano cried out in his pain.

"Now we're even, Joe." Ryan's white teeth were bared in an unpleasant grin. "You got one hand and I got one hand." He tossed the quirt after the gun and drove his fist into Pompano's face.

The dark man staggered back, sobbing, blood gushing from his nose over his lips and down to his chin. He wiped it off with a shoulder as Ryan moved in.

Ryan's left hand stabbed out, driving Pompano back. Pompano backed into a chair and Ryan's darting left drove him into the table. The Turkey Track hands scattered as the table went over. Pompano fell amid a welter of food and dishes.

Ryan knelt, got his hand in Pompano's shirt, and jerked him to his feet. He released the foreman and drove a fist into his face. Pompano fell face-downward and lay still.

Ryan turned Pompano over and raised him again. A rough hand grabbed Ryan's shoulder. Ryan lifted his head, his nostrils flaring, his teeth bared.

Irv Halliday's face was white under its

tan. "That's enough," he said harshly.

"Enough for you maybe," Ryan said. "Not for me." He jerked Pompano upright and shook him. Pompano's eyes opened.

"Say 'Uncle'," said Ryan.

Pompano's battered lips moved. "Go to hell," he said hoarsely.

Ryan let him go and drove his fist in Pompano's face. Pompano ended up against the wall.

"Hit him again and I'll kill you," said Halliday in a deadly voice.

Ryan turned and looked at the gun in Halliday's hand. "He's going to say 'Uncle'," Ryan said, "so go ahead and shoot."

"Uncle," said Pompano faintly from the floor.

Ryan said, "All I want out of you, Halliday, is a horse race. Have I got it?"

"You've got it," growled Halliday. "Saturday, same time, same place. Now get off my ranch, Ryan!"

VI

SIM RYAN brought the mare out of Burton's livery and crawled stiffly into the saddle. He put her down the street and as he rode he was conscious of many eyes on him. The word had gone around that Ryan and Halliday had clashed and the grudge race coming off was the main topic of conversation. In times past, Ryan would have been pleased with this. Now he was irked.

His irritation puzzled him. He tried to figure things out as he let the mare pick her own pace down the canyon for a daily workout. When he emerged on the flat, he hadn't figured things out and that didn't help his disposition.

Tommy Block, the Indian boy, was waiting under the cottonwoods. He leaned against a tree, watching Ryan approach. He was silent while Ryan dismounted. After a longer silence, while Ryan lighted a cigar, he spoke.

"My uncle," he announced, "has watched Halliday's new horse run. He says the animal can outrun the wind."

Brown Betty put out her long, ungainly neck to its maximum length and sniffed Tommy Block.

Ryan studied the end of his cigar.

Tommy waited an unconscionable period, then he said, "Perhaps my uncle lied. But to be much safer, why not use my

horse? No one has ever sat him but me. I have ridden both my horse and your ugly brown mare and I know my horse is the fastest."

Ryan said, "Jump on her and take her around, Tommy. We'll save your horse for another time."

Tommy Block threw a brown leg over Ryan's saddle and lifted the reins. He regarded Ryan with big somber black eyes. "I believe," he said accusingly, "that you think I am lying about my horse, Mr. Ryan." He turned the mare and touched her with his bare heels.

"Ride her hard," Ryan called. "Make her sweat, Tommy."

He squatted in the shade of the cottonwoods and watched the brown mare fly around the quarter-mile oval with her switching tail streaming. The Indian boy's head lay along her neck and he was making a good ride. Ryan felt a sense of satisfaction displace his irritation and he sank back against the tree, sighing contentedly. The thud of the mare's flying hoofs was like music to him.

"That's a pretty picture," said a cool voice above him.

Ryan started to rise, then sank back against the tree. He nodded curtly to Karen Halliday and with a powerful effort turned his eyes back to the mare. "She runs well," he said briefly.

There was a creak of saddle leather and an indescribable perfume reached Ryan. His nostrils flared as he tried to fill his lungs with it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her boots, the curve of her leg against the jeans, her slender brown fingers clutching a pair of gloves. He resisted mightily the impulse to look up at her. He was afraid if he did, she'd move away. He kept his eyes on the mare.

Surprising him, she sat down beside him. "The mare is ready to go, I suppose?" she asked.

"You really want to know, or you looking for something to talk about?" he asked her, and saw the red flush creep up her sun-tanned neck and spread to the roots of her ash-blond hair. Her eyes were definitely purple now as she turned them on him.

"All right," she said defiantly. "So I didn't come to talk about horses. So I'll say it. Joe Pompano isn't going to forget what you did to him, Ryan."

"Neither will I forget what he did to me," Ryan replied. He tossed his cigar away. "Why did you show up here, Miss Halliday?"

She slapped her boots with her gloves. "Damn you, Ryan!" she said. "Can't you let me get to it in my own way?"

He laughed and removed his hat and laid it on the ground. "Go ahead," he invited. "I'll be quiet."

She said, "Irv's got his heart set on winning this race. I've got money of my own.

be willing to pay for such a thing."

"How much would you be willing to pay?" he asked gently.

"Ten thousand dollars," she said promptly.

Ryan stood up then, looking down at her. He said, "Why is it so important for your brother to win a horse race?"

She wouldn't look at him. He had to strain to hear her voice. "It's not a horse race," she said. "It's more than that. Irv can't lose, Ryan. He can't!"

FUN FOR THE VAQUERO



THE EARLY Spanish vaqueros of California took their fun where they found it, and since most of their time was spent in the saddle, they found ways to get a little fun out of their work.

In driving cattle, there are usually a few old mossyhorns who have their own ideas about how they want to pass their time, and they don't quite care for the prospect of being driven along a dusty trail for any distance. These old steers then have a tendency to break from the herd and hit for the

nearest horizon with their heads down and their tails raised high in displeasure.

The American cowboy usually cussed and went out and tried to out-manuever the animal and eventually haze him back into the herd. But the Spaniard, having to do the job anyway, invented the COLEANDO, a method that got him back effectively, and at the same time furnished the rider a little sport.

When the mossyhorn set out for parts unknown, the vaquero took out after him, then leaned over his saddle and caught the wanderer by the tail. He would wrap the tail around his own leg to get a better grip on it, then he would steer his mount ahead and a little to one side, so that the steer was running on the bias, trying to recapture his dignity and overcome the sideways pull on his captured tail.

At about the time the steer was exerting his greatest sideways pressure, the vaquero would suddenly turn loose the animal's tail. Thrown suddenly out of balance, the running steer would turn two or three very undignified diagonal somersaults and end up with his dignity and his insides and his brain in a completely scrambled condition.

Confused and humiliated, and convinced that freedom wasn't worth the effort, he was easily driven back to the herd, after which he usually kept his tail between his legs and "vamosed" only in the direction the vaquero wanted him to go.

—Tex Mumford

I'll make it worth your while to see that he wins."

Ryan was quiet for a long time, his heart heavy. He took his time lighting another cigar and when he had it going, he said, "I won't give you a song and dance about being as honest as a horse. That mare's never let me down."

SHE said, with a note of desperation in her voice, "You might change your mind if you knew how much money I'd

"You haven't told me why it's so important," he insisted.

She stood up. "All right, I'll tell you. Maybe I'm foolish. It's got something to do with Pompano and Irv and you, and something else I only feel but don't understand. But I do know that if Irv loses, something dreadful will happen!"

"Your price isn't right," Ryan said, his nostrils flaring.

Her eyes sparkled. "What do you mean, Ryan?"

"Ten thousand," he said and his long arm reached for her and pulled her roughly against him. Her face was tilted and he pushed his lips hard against her soft ones. Her arms came up, and for a moment she was yielding against him. But when he said, "And you," she pushed him back with all her strength, her fists pounding at him. Finding this ineffectual, her nails ripped into his face.

He stepped back, not fast, fingering the gashes on his cheek. "That wasn't any worse proposition than the one you made me," he said.

She sat down on the ground, dropped her face in her hands, and cried.

Tommy Block brought the mare toward the cottonwoods and Ryan waved him off. "Take her around a few more times," he said.

He watched the boy wheel the mare, his brown face stony as he listened to Karen Halliday's sniffles. But when he turned to her she was composed.

She got to her feet, gathered up her reins, and stepped into her saddle. She looked down at Ryan.

"I asked for it, I suppose," she said wryly. "I'm glad, Sim. It makes me—I . . . What I mean is I think more of you for it." She looked away from him as she spoke.

His heart began thumping and pounding, and in spite of himself he stepped closer, looking up at her.

She wouldn't look at him, but she kept talking. "I hate to think that something might happen that could—spoil our knowing each other."

Ryan tried to keep the excitement out of his voice. "I've traveled a long piece," he said earnestly, "and I've been looking all the way—for you."

"Then—then you will think about it?" she asked, leaning toward him, her red lips parted.

Ryan flung his cigar to the ground and his tanned face turned a deeper bronze. "By God!" he said.

She stiffened in her saddle. "You—you!" she panted, speechless. "I know what you're thinking! You want me. . . You dog! I wish I had Pompano's quirt!" She wheeled her horse and put the animal toward the canyon at a hard gallop.

Tommy Block cantered up on the lathered mare. He slipped to the ground and

loosened the cinches. He said, "The best way to handle a squaw is to beat her as often as there's a new moon." He added sagely, "My uncle told me."

"This uncle of yours," Ryan said savagely, "is going to get you in a mess of trouble." He began wiping the mare down. . . .

A little later when Ryan rapped on Judge Yates' door, he was touched with excitement.

The judge's voice sang out, "Come on in, Ryan."

Ryan pushed open the door and paused there for a moment, his eyes sweeping the room.

Judge Yates stood in the center of the room, a bottle in one hand, a cluster of glasses in the other. He waved the bottle at Ryan. "Come on—come on in," he said cheerfully. "Others here and waiting."

Irv Halliday didn't look up from his boots, and Lem Ashley took his pipe out of his mouth, made a quick, small motion with it, and put it back in his mouth.

"Skip the drinks, Judge," Halliday said tightly.

Ryan took a cigar from his pocket and licked the tobacco leaves into place. "I'm not drinking, Judge," he said.

JUDGE YATES made a childish motion with his hands. "Damn it!" he grunted and slammed the bottle and glasses on the table top.

He glared at each of them for a moment, then walked to his desk and raised the roll top with a clatter, and threw himself into his leather-covered chair. He stared at the side of the mountain that rose outside his window, and waited.

Irv Halliday shuffled his boots back and forth, then looked at Ryan with hard gray eyes. "You ready to make a bet?"

Ryan was reminded momentarily of Karen Halliday's eyes, for Irv's eyes were shaped like Karen's if not the same color. He said, "I'm here. How much money have I got Judge?"

"You know damn well you've got twenty-eight thousand dollars," growled Judge Yates. He brightened. "How long you keep it is something else." He chuckled, a high, thin, old man's laugh.

"I haven't that much cash." Halliday scowled.

Ryan's pulse quickened. He felt the beat in his temples. This was working out like he wanted it to, he thought. He said, "How much is the Turkey Track worth, Halliday?"

Halliday sat up straight, his lips a thin line. "More than you'll ever have, Ryan," he spat out at the cowboy.

Ryan smiled crookedly. "Never judge a horse by the length of his ears," he advised Halliday, and the big cattleman reddened.

"All right, Ryan," he said. "My ranch is worth forty thousand dollars—land, buildings, equipment and stock."

Ryan nodded. "That's a fair valuation from what I've seen. I've got twenty-eight thousand dollars and Brown Betty is worth twelve thousand—to me, she is."

Halliday got to his feet. "Twelve thousand—for a horse?" His voice deepened to a bellow.

Ryan was not disturbed. "Don't give me the treatment, Halliday," he said. "You know I won twenty-one thousand with her less than two weeks ago."

"What makes you think I'd be chump enough to bet my ranch?" Halliday asked angrily.

Ryan turned to the door. "I didn't have you figured for a four-flusher," he said. He got the door open before Halliday whirled him around.

Lem Ashley came in fast for a short, fat man. He had Halliday's arms pinned down and said, "Let's don't go off half-cocked like this, Irv."

"Nobody's calling me a four-flusher!" panted Halliday. "Least of all this maverick. Let me go, Lem!"

"Let him go, Lem," Ryan said coolly. "Any time I can't lick a lady-killer with a broken arm, I'll put myself out to pasture."

Judge Yates cackled happily.

Halliday made another effort to free himself, the cords in his neck standing out as he strained to get away from Ashley's iron grip.

"Lady-killer!" he sputtered. "Damn you, Ryan, where'd you get that?"

"Things like that get around," Ryan said. "If you don't want to bet, Halliday, I'll be on my way." Suddenly he hoped Halliday wouldn't bet.

Halliday relaxed, almost sagging. "All right," he said. "Let me go, Lem, I'm all

right now."

He wheeled and went back to the judge's desk. "Draw up the papers, Judge," he said. "Make it tighter'n a cinch strap. I don't want anybody welching on this bet."

Judge Yates said seriously. Sure you want to go through with this, Irv?"

Halliday's jaw tightened as he looked at Ryan. "Damn right I'm sure," he said.

The judge brought out writing paper and pen. He lifted his white head to peer up at Halliday. "You own the Turkey Track clear? Your sister isn't part owner?"

"It's all mine," Halliday said.

Ryan remembered Karen Halliday's face as she'd looked at him that afternoon down on the flats. He breathed hard as he came up to the desk.

"I guess maybe I was hasty," he said. "I think maybe I better—"

"No, you don't!" barked Halliday. He turned from the judge to Ashley and back again to the judge. "You two heard him. He put it up to me. Now he's trying to wiggle out. To hell with that!"

Ryan grinned crookedly, his momentary pity for Halliday gone. He nodded, "That's right, Judge. Write it up."

VII

IN THE stillness of the room, the judge's pen scratched noisily. From the street below, the staccato crack of a muleskinner's whip echoed and reechoed between the canyon walls.

Halliday said, "Judge, you fix it this way. If for any reason either of us can't race a horse next Saturday at two P.M., the bet's not off. That all right with you, Ryan?"

"Suits me," Ryan said and sat down in the chair he'd used when Doc Frazee had set his arm and sewed the gash in his scalp.

Now that he'd seen the thing come off as he planned he had no stomach for it. He was reasonably certain Brown Betty could beat any horse Halliday had brought from Denver. Not more than six months had passed since Ryan and Weston had played Denver for a month and the ugly brown mare had made a clean sweep. This knowledge left a flat taste in Ryan's mouth.

The judge finished writing and straight-

ened up, looking at Halliday and offering him the pen. "Sign it," he said.

Halliday seized the pen and scrawled his name without reading the agreement. He threw the pen on the desk and wheeled.

"Come on, Lem," he said. Halliday followed Ashley out the door without looking at Ryan. Past the closed door, the sound of their boots and the sudden outburst of voices were loud, receding as Halliday and the sheriff went down the corridor.

"Now you, Ryan," the judge said, motioning toward the paper.

Ryan got out of his chair, went across the room, and looked down at the judge.

"Suppose," he said, "I don't sign it."

The judge leaned back in his chair. His thin fingers drummed on the chair arm as he frowned out the window. He swung his head and said, "She's got to you, huh?"

Ryan dropped into a chair beside the desk and got a cigar from his pocket. He said studiously, "What do you mean by that, Judge?"

Judge Yates made an impatient movement with his hand. "Too many people interested in what you're doing, Ryan. You've been watched. She did come to see you down on the flat, didn't she?"

"She?" Ryan asked impatiently. "Who the hell you talking about?"

The judge sighed. "She's a damn pretty girl, Ryan. Wouldn't be the first time a man's been pulled in two. But whether you sign or not, Halliday's got a case. He's got two witnesses. Me and Sheriff Ashley. Anyway, you'll not try to euchre out."

Ryan signed. "I was just wondering," he said pensively.

"Not about whether you'll win or not," the judge chuckled. "A race, that is."

"Why do you suppose he wanted that business in there about whether we race or not," Ryan said wonderingly. "What's he planning something?"

"I wouldn't venture a guess," the judge said, "but if I was you, I wouldn't let my horse out of my sight."

"You don't think he'd have my horse stolen, do you?" demanded Ryan.

The judge shook his head. "When a man gets in a corner," he said, "it's hard to say what he'll do or what he won't do. And Halliday's been backed into a pretty unpleasant position."

"Nothing won't happen to him," Ryan

observed, "that he don't deserve."

The judge folded the agreement and put it in his safe. He swung the heavy door shut and twirled the combination.

He said, "You need a drink, Ryan," and went on, querulously, "I don't know what you got against Halliday. He's a good man, and well liked around here."

"Suppose I told you," Ryan said, "that he'd ruined a woman's life and killed a man in cold blood."

"That's not something to say about any man," the judge warned, "unless you got proof."

"The way you look at things, maybe I haven't," Ryan said. "But in my own mind, I know."

The judge shook his head. "Let's get that drink," he said. He tapped his forehead with his fingers. "You're a sick man, Ryan. But I like you anyway."

They went down the stairs and crossed the lobby. At the door of the Parker House Bar the judge stood aside and waited for Ryan to enter.

RYAN stepped through the door and crossed to the bar. The hum of conversation died and Ryan flushed, stopping at the bar, with his left elbow resting on the mahogany. The judge stood beside him.

The bartender stopped before them and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ryan. I can't serve you."

The judge spluttered, "Sir, what's the meaning of this? I demand—"

Ryan put his hand on the judge's shoulder. "Save it, Judge," he said. He leaned across the bar. "Who protested?" he asked the barman.

The bartender put his hands out in a helpless motion.

Ryan shrugged and said, "Come on, Judge."

He went across the room, opened the street door, and waited for the judge. Judge Yates strode out with his white head high in the air, a half-smile on his wrinkled face.

"Damn me, Ryan!" he chuckled. "To think of me being thrown out of a saloon! And at my age."

They dodged across the street, and went into the Pine Tree. A miner looked up from the bar, saw them, and nudged his companion. Down the line, elbows went

to work and slowly conversation died as Ryan and Judge Yates went to the bar.

They had their drink and gradually the noise built up again. Then from the back of the saloon, a loud and profane voice demanded to know where the racehorse man was.

Ryan turned as Muley Dawson, the muleskinner he had chastised, swaggered toward the front of the saloon. The muleskinner had his long whip looped around his shoulders and he staggered against a man at the bar. The man pushed him away, and Dawson came on to stop and stand spraddle-legged before Ryan.

"I want a bet," he said loudly. "I want to bet against that freak of yours, mister."

Ryan turned his back on Dawson. "No bets," he said into his whisky glass.

The judge cackled. "Take him on, Ryan. His money's as good as Halliday's."

"I lost money on your horse," Dawson snarled. "You owe me a chance to even up."

"I owe you nothing," Ryan said, without turning.

He felt Dawson's clawing hand on his shoulder. The muleskinner whirled him around, and when Ryan turned, Dawson was snaking a .44 from inside his shirt. The men around them scattered as Ryan threw the contents of his whisky glass into Dawson's face. He moved in quick and hit the skinner with his shoulder.

A man yelled, "Look out there!"

Momentarily off-balance, Dawson thumbed a shot, and the powder burned Ryan's hand. He threw his good arm around Dawson and tried to reach on around and get the gun. They fell and rolled over and over in the sawdust and the gun went off again.

Ryan got to his feet with the gun in his left hand. Dawson lay writhing on the floor. The crowd closed in around Dawson. A man knelt and announced, "Gut shot, by hell!"

The door flew open and Lem Ashley surged in with a gun in his hand. He looked at Ryan, walked slowly past him, and pushed his way through the crowd to look down at Dawson.

"Some of you men take him over to Doc Frazee's office," he said grimly. He wheeled and held out his hand. "Give me that gun, Ryan."

Ryan passed the gun to the sheriff. He

said, "He was looking for trouble."

"Self defense, Sheriff," Judge Yates interposed. "Or accidental. I don't know which. But in any case—"

"We're not in court," barked Lem Ashley. He glared at Ryan. "You come with me, feller."

"For what?" Ryan asked truculently.

"I'm going to put you where you'll stay out of trouble," Ashley said firmly. "It ain't safe for you to be running around loose."

"But, dammit!" Ryan raged. "I—"

ASHLEY put a firm hand on Ryan's good arm and steered him away from the bar and out the door.

"Listen, young feller," he said grimly, "I don't know if you know it or not, but you're getting yourself in a tight. Somebody's going to sink a slug into you and I don't want that to happen. I want to collect the money I put up on Halliday's horse. Now you come on along. I'll turn you out for the race and then you can get the hell out of the country."

Ryan moved his big shoulders. He walked beside the sheriff, thinking, What a hell of a way to spend a night before a race!

"There's just one thing you're forgetting, Sheriff," he said aloud. After the race tomorrow, I'm going to be ranching in these parts."

The sheriff said, "I've thought about that, Ryan. But I ain't worrying. . . ."

When Ryan dropped off to sleep on the rickety cot in Lem Ashley's jail, the sounds of revelry were at their height. The noise seemed just as loud when he awakened some time later with the rays of a lantern singing in his eyes through the bars. He came awake all at once, like a cat, tensed and ready to move.

Jed Burton, the liveryman, held the lantern, while Sheriff Ashley fumbled with his keys.

Ryan swung his booted feet to the floor. "What's up?" he wanted to know.

Ashley swung the door open. His square red face was grim. "Something's happened to your mare," he said. "Jed just told me."

Ryan was on his feet and moving toward the door. "What's wrong with her?" he demanded harshly. "What's happened?"

"I don't know, I don't, so help me,"

mumbled Burton. "I heard a noise in the stalls a while ago and went back there. She was down. I heard her late this afternoon but didn't think nothing of it. She—"

Ryan heard no more because he was out the door and running down the street toward the livery. A drunk got in his way, and Ryan wheeled him roughly aside. The drunk staggered off the board walk and fell. Ryan kept going.

He turned into the livery, ran along the row of box stalls in the darkness. He yelled, as Ashley and Burton turned in behind him, "Hurry with that light!" His heart was in his throat. He could hear the mare's low, unnatural breathing.

The light came up and Ryan grabbed it out of Burton's hands, turned the wick up. He went into the stall. The mare lay on her side, and for a moment Ryan could see nothing. Then he sucked in his breath and cursed as he dropped to his knees. A pool of clotted blood seeped from under the mare, saturating the straw. Ryan leaned closer, his breathing harsh, examining the mare's hindquarters.

"She's been hamstrung!" he blurted, and raised fierce eyes to Burton and Ashley.

Ashley slowly got his pipe from his pocket and absently thrust it into his mouth. "I'll be damned!" he murmured. "I'll be double-damned!"

Burton rubbed his whiskery jaws, his mouth open, his Adam's apple working.

"Don't stand there!" Ryan shouted. "Go get Frazee. Get him here now!"

"Frazee'd never come for a horse," Burton said.

Ryan sprang to his feet. "He'll come for me!" he said and strode out of the stable.

"Easy there, feller!" shouted Ashley. "You're in no shape to ask anybody nothing."

Ryan kept going. He kept thinking that if Ashley hadn't jailed him this wouldn't have happened. It went over and over in his mind. Then he almost stopped with the power of the thought that struck him. Halliday was to blame! Halliday and Ashley were friends. Ashley had bet on Halliday's horse. Halliday had either crippled the mare or had it done. Not only that, Ryan thought savagely, but Halliday had rigged the bet so that if the mare couldn't run, he'd still win.

Ryan cursed furiously and bolted into the Pine Tree, a big, hurried man.

Frazee was at the chuckaluck table.

Ryan brushed through the crowd and got Frazee's arm. "My mare's hurt!" he said abruptly. "I want you to look at her."

FRAZEE looked at Ryan's hand on his arm and looked up at Ryan. "I'm no horse doctor," he growled, "and not only that, but I'm ahead for once. Find McKindrick. He's a horse doctor of sorts."

Ryan reached down with his left hand and twisted his gunbelt until his gun rested butt foremost. He got the gun out with his left hand and shoved it into Frazee's back. "You're coming," he grated. "Now!"

Frazee let out a dry, painful laugh. "I'm coming," he said.

Back in the livery barn the yellow light of the lantern glinted on the sweat on

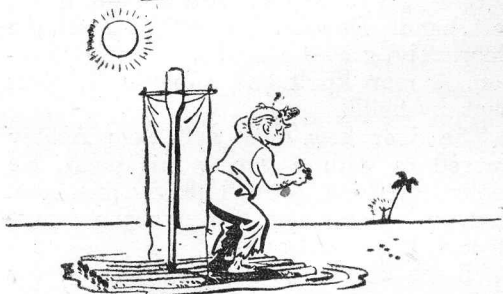
THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



AROMA SWEET AS ANY ROSE —

IT PACKS RIGHT



PACKS TO PLEASE YOU—
GOODNESS KNOWS!

Frazee's forehead as he straightened up from the mare and looked at Ryan. He shook his head.

"Listen, man. I can't do the impossible. I could sew that muscle together, and maybe it'd heal if she lived—which is doubtful. She's lost a gallon of blood."

Ryan's eyes were glazed. He shook himself, trying not to look at the mare. "Get out!" he said dully. "Get out, all of you."

Ashley, Burton, and Frazee went out together.

"You, Burton!" rasped Ryan. "Take the lantern with you."

Burton scurried back and took the lantern from the wall and scurried out again. The stable was dark.

VIII

DARKNESS hid the agony in Ryan's face as he went to the mare's head and got down on his knees. His eyes felt wet, and there was a lump in his throat, choking him. His familiar scent reached Brown Betty, and she whickered softly and tried to raise her head. Ryan's hand felt the velvety-smooth muzzle, then it fell away and came up with a gun.

His heart stood still when he placed the gun muzzle behind her ear. His thumb drew back the hammer, and he sat there for long seconds, trying to stop the painful thumping of his heart. At last his thumb slid off the hammer, there was a tiny flare of flame, and he felt the mare's reflex. She lay still then.

Ryan sat there for a long time, his head

down, the gun still in his hand, the odor of burned hair in his nostrils. Finally he got heavily to his feet, shoved the gun into his scabbard, and went slowly out of the stable. He leaned against the stable door, looking down the street.

Music, laughter, shouts grated on his ears and he turned and went down the canyon road on foot, his boots striking against boulders in the roadway, staggering as he went into ruts. He walked until his legs ached, then turned off the road and sat down on a boulder. He sat there, bitterness and hatred in his heart, listening to the mocking laughter of the creek as it raced toward the flatlands.

Your revenge is flying right back in your face, Ryan, he told himself. But all that is just so much nothing when compared to the loss of Brown Betty. There was only one Brown Betty. She brought you everything you ever owned. Now she's gone. She's gone and you're alone, Ryan. You've got nothing. And a man named Halliday is responsible.

Quick rage flamed in Ryan as he got to his feet, then he sank slowly back. His deep sense of loss was too heavy on him for action. He groaned, put his head in his hands, and then his self-mockery and grief were gone again before his fierce-burning rage. Rage against Halliday and Lem Ashley. He knew he'd kill Halliday, and when Ashley tried to arrest him, he would plant a bullet in the lawman, too. He lived and relived this scene in his mind, relishing the thought of facing Halliday

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



WITH EVERY PUFF
YOUR PLEASURE GROWS!
with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



*It costs
no more
to get
the best!*

and Ashley with a gun in his hand.

Slowly his rage burned out. He wondered about Tommy Block. Where had the Indian boy been while the mare was being crippled? A vague alarm possessed him and he got to his feet. He knew where the Indian camp was located. He tramped back up the canyon to the town, now slowly buttoning up a night of revelry.

In the livery barn he saddled one of the rental horses in the dark. He rode out of the stable, leaning low in the saddle to avoid the door, and turned down the canyon. Behind him the town was beginning its drunken sleep.

It was dark in the canyon, but above him the sky was beginning to lighten. The wind that brushed his face had touched the pine trees on its way down the mountain and he breathed deeply, wondering about Tommy, and about what he himself would do now that he had no horse to run. He smiled grimly as he reminded himself that Halliday would run no horse either. But in behind all these chaotic thoughts were thoughts of Karen Halliday. He tried to push them back, knowing that where she was concerned he was touched in the head. She made him want to do the wrong things.

It was gray dawn when he rode into the Indian camp. A fire smoldered in front of the biggest wickiup, and a dozen mongrels yapped at his suddenly nervous mount's heels. He sat the horse in front of the wickiup for a moment, then he got awkwardly to the ground.

A man moved out of the brush shack and straightened to his full, tall height. He was as tall as Ryan and he wore his hair in long braids. He had on a dirty brown shirt and levis so tight the buttons and rivets threatened to give way.

"I'm looking for Tommy Block," Ryan said.

"You're the big man, Ryan," asked the Indian, and Ryan nodded. "I'm Ed Block, Tommy's uncle." He held out his hand, white-man fashion and Ryan took it.

"I've heard a lot about you from Tommy," Ryan said for lack of something better to say.

THE Indian let his head drop for a second, then motioned Ryan to enter the wickiup.

Ryan stooped and went through the low

doorway. He stood inside in the half-light, adjusting his eyes to the dimness. The boy lay on a pile of skins on the floor, moving uneasily. There was a bulky mass of something on his head and when Ryan went closer he saw that it was a mass of moss and herbs, held in place with buckskin thongs.

On his knees beside Tommy, Ryan looked at Ed Block.

"He came to me like this," Ed Block said. "He has not spoken."

Tommy turned his head at the sound of Ed's voice. A jumble of words came tumbling out, words that Ryan couldn't understand.

"He is talking with the spirits," Ed Block said gravely, and tapped his forehead. "He is talking of big man Ryan and the mare called Brown Betty, but I do not understand." He was silent for a long moment, then he said hesitantly, "Tommy, he wishes you to take his horse. To run against that of Halliday."

Ryan put his hand on the boy's face. It was hot to his touch. He said, "Tommy, Tommy Block."

Tommy Block's dark eyes were on him, but not seeing him. The boy twisted and turned, another outburst of words coming from him.

Ed Block said, "I'll call her." He padded silently out and came back in a few moments followed by a fat squaw. The squaw came to the boy and began removing the moss and herbs from his head. She didn't look at Ryan.

Ed Block said, "Come," and went out. Ryan followed.

The tall Indian went down between the wickiups with Ryan at his heels. Beyond the creek, in a small patch of grass a huge black horse grazed. The horse threw up its head and gazed at them as they stood beside the creek.

"I brought the horse in during the night," Ed Block said. "Tommy got the horse as a colt. I gelded it myself."

"A lot of horse, all right," Ryan admitted.

"Tommy has told me," Ed Block stated, "that the black is faster than your brown mare."

Ryan shook his head regretfully, but said nothing. He found it hard to believe. The deep stab in his heart reminded him this would be something that could never

be proved. The image of his own horse seemed to stand clearly before him.

"The horse isn't brown, the boy told me," he said. "Only Tommy can ride him."

Ed Block said, "That I don't know. But you can try."

Ryan smiled grimly. If you could produce a horse that could beat Halliday's, he owed it to himself to try—before he killed the man.

Half an hour later, sweating and swearing, from trying to saddle the gelding, Ed Block said disgustedly, "I'll have to get some help, Ryan."

Ryan half-smiled. "Never had a saddle on him," he said. "That's the trouble. I'll try to ride him slick, Ed."

The Indian shook his head. "Better not. Not with that arm."

Ryan slipped his arm out of the sling. "I can use it a little," he said. "I'm goin' to try."

The black flinched and trembled as Ryan laid a soothing hand on his withers. He was lathered from his exertions in keeping Ed Block from saddling him. Ryan caught up the hackamore and followed the fighting horse as it circled. Ryan's voice was low-pitched, quieting. He got the gelding settled and led it to a boulder. He stepped on the boulder and slid astride the powerful back.

The black stood there trembling, head and hindquarters down. Ryan felt the skin quiver under the pressure of his legs. He felt the muscles ripple and bunch, and a tiny tingle of fear ran through him. Then Ryan lifted the single hackamore lead and suddenly the horse exploded into action.

The black whirled like a cat, switching ends with lightninglike rapidity. Ryan nearly lost his seat. He grabbed the flying back mane and clenched his legs until they ached, swaying with the snapping turns as the black gelding switched ends again and again. Suddenly the big horse reared, squealing, and brought his forefeet to the ground with a spine-snapping jolt. Ryan's head snapped forward and he felt the blood start from his nose. He nearly cried aloud with the pain in his arm.

The black stood there for a moment with a bowed back, gathering himself, then he again exploded into a series of sunfishing jumps that brought him in among the wickiups.

MONGRELS fled, howling, and the crowd of Indians who had silently collected to watch, scattered. The black bucked through the wickiups, crashing into one, then on into the trees, with Ryan ducking and dodging the tree limbs, his broken arm aching and throbbing.

Another tree limb loomed up in front of Ryan. He tried to avoid it. A blinding flash hit him between the eyes and he felt himself falling. The ground seemed to rise up and hit him. He lay there half-stunned, but still conscious.

The black bucked on through the trees, then kicked out and began running. Ed Block and the other Indians, whooping, closed in on the horse.

Ryan sat up, holding his arm, wiping blood and sweat from his face.

"That was quite a ride, Ryan," Karen Halliday's voice said. "You looked good."

He stared at her. She sat her horse a dozen feet from him, a quizzical smile on her face. A jeering smile, he thought.

He frowned, because of the pain in his arm. He got to his knees and stayed there, for he couldn't get up and he couldn't sit back, immobilized as he was with pain.

He said, "Why is it you make me so damned mad I could eat rocks?"

She slid gracefully to the ground, came up to him, and took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the blood from his mouth and chin. "You're in no condition to get hostile with me, Ryan," she said calmly. She pushed him back to the ground. "You're a complete fool, Sim Ryan. You'll ruin your arm."

"You know of a better way?" he asked.

She put her hands on his shoulder and tried to shake him. She said, "Ryan, I looked you up as soon as I heard about your horse. I knew you'd think Irv had something to do with it."

"He send you to look for me?" Ryan asked grimly.

She shook her head. "He doesn't know I'm here. He—wouldn't approve."

"Neither do I," Ryan said fiercely. "This is between Irv and me, and it doesn't concern you!"

She said, "Oh, but it does. It concerns me two ways. I must—"

Ryan said, "Let's me and you play a game. Let's play it doesn't matter for now. You be a good girl and get the hell out of my hair."

"You—you!" she gasped. "If you wasn't so big. . . And to think I came to help you!"

"Help me?" he giped. "What'd you bring—a knife or gun?" He stopped, his face going white as perspiration beaded his forehead. "And—and anyway, how could you help me?"

Her eyes were bright with tears that were close to the surface. "I'll ride the black for you," she offered.

He rubbed a sleeve over his forehead, stared at her, and laughed shortly. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?" he snapped. "You think I'd trust you to ride in *that* race for me?"

She put her hands in her pockets suddenly. "I want to slap you," she said.

"Go ahead," he snarled, "if it'll make you feel better."

She snatched her hands out and slapped him hard, her eyes blazing. Then she stood there looking down at him with her lips parted in the shape of an "O" and a growing horror in her eyes. Suddenly she crumpled against him and he held her tight with his good arm.

"I don't know why," she whispered, "I don't know why, Sim Ryan, but I belong here. Maybe I'm disloyal to Irv. I suppose I am, for feeling as I do, but—"

"You can't ride for me," Ryan said firmly, "and that's all there is to it."

She wrenched herself out of his arms and ran to her horse. Vaulting into her saddle she rode like the devil through the group of Indians trying to corral the black gelding. She rode alongside the black, eased from her saddle, and onto the black. The black stopped suddenly.

She called out to the Indians, "Va-moose!" They got quickly out of her way.

The black didn't pitch. He stood quietly, his eyes rolling, and she lifted the hackamore and pushed him along. She rode him to the water's edge, then turned him up the creek. She rode him along the creek, then back to the trees where Ryan was gasping in astonishment.

She said quietly, "It's no miracle, Ryan. I helped Tommy Block gentle him. And I'll ride him this afternoon."

Ryan said helplessly, "I suppose you will. . . ."

MORE than two thousand people were on the flats that afternoon. Rigs,

buggies, buckboards, surreys, spring wagons and riders were still streaming down the canyon when the black gelding and a magnificent sorrel were jockeyed into position at the starting line.

Whiskey-dulled to still the ache in arm, Sim Ryan sat in the shade of a spring wagon and watched Karen Halliday handle the black. The big gelding was excited by the noise and the crowd. But she handled him. She wore levis and an oversized shirt that hid her breasts and curving hips. An old hat was pulled low over her eyes and her hair was tucked up inside it. Few realized that a girl was riding the black.

Halliday was one of the few who knew. Ryan exulted in that knowledge, and waited anxiously for the end of the race. The Colt was nestled butt foremost on his left side and, thinking of the man, he touched it with his left hand.

Ashley came up to him and said, "We're going to start right away, Ryan."

Ryan nodded. "Let 'em go," he said. He looked at Ashley, wondering if the stocky, red-faced sheriff knew what was in his mind.

Ashley turned away, hesitated, then went on.

Ryan had little hope the gelding would beat the sorrel, now that he'd had a good look at Halliday's entry. He was almost tempted to face Halliday before the race. That would end the necessity for a race. A dead man can't collect, he thought grimly. And he knew he'd never rest until Halliday was dead, until he'd paid with his life for the brown mare, for Weston and for Ida, and for Tommy Block.

He forced back his surge of hate and rage and made himself wait.

X

LEM ASHLEY went swinging back across to his waiting group and Halliday ran out waving his arms and shouting for the riders to get lined up. The horses were in position, a gun barked, and a roar went up from the crowd.

Excited people surged around, cutting off Ryan's view. He got painfully to his feet, climbed up on a spring wagon, and stood on the seat. The sorrel was out front with the black losing ground. Ryan bit his lip. The black could run, but he was no match for the sorrel.

Ryan knew it now. The two horses were drawing further apart and Ryan started to swing to the ground. He stopped, freezing suddenly, as he saw the girl's arm go up and come down. She was using the whip. He felt a sudden surge of his emotion. She was trying. She was trying for him! He knew it.

He stared as the black surged ahead, and the crowd moaned. Slowly the black crept up on the sorrel's flying hindquarters. They were not more than a hundred feet from the finish line now, and the crowd was suddenly silent as the black inched ahead. Karen's hand went up again and went down, and the black put on another heart-stopping burst of speed that carried him far to the front. They finished like that, the dust enveloping them as they plunged to a halt way down beyond the finish line.

Ryan sat down in the spring wagon, suddenly sick from the tension that had been in him.

Ed Block came up, grinning widely. "I guess we made it, Ryan," he said. "I had everything on the black I could get my hands on. The rest of the tribe did all right, too."

Ryan nodded, feeling a letdown that surprised him. Victory was flat; he realized it then. Nothing had changed. He now had everything that mattered to Halliday, and he still wanted to stand up to him with fists or gun. He knew then that he'd never have another easy moment until that meeting in violence was done with. He sighed deeply.

Ed Block, hearing that sigh, jerked his head and muttered, "Tommy's here. He wouldn't stay away when he got conscious, Ryan."

Tommy was there, looking pale and sick. He sat his horse with the horrible mess of herbs and moss still bound to his head. He even tried to smile.

Ryan stepped down from the spring wagon. He said, "Tommy, we've made ourselves a sight of money today."

Tommy shook his head. "No," he said. "I have won nothing. I loaned the black to you for this race, Mr. Ryan."

"You got to take something," Ryan said, his eyes searching the crowd for Halliday. He saw him with the sorrel and started for him, knocking a man aside with his hand.

Tommy Block called. "You can give me a gunbelt! I'd like one like yours to hold my gun."

Ed Block's voice was so rough that Ryan stopped short. "Where'd you get a gun, Tommy?"

Tommy reached inside his shirt and pulled out a .45 Colt. He said proudly, "It's just like Mr. Ryan's."

Ryan's eyes were on the gun, his forehead ridged, frowning. He moved back toward the Indian boy. "Where'd you get that gun?" he asked hoarsely.

Tommy looked apprehensive, at Ryan's tone. He said, "I did not steal it, Mr. Ryan. I found it."

"Found it? Where? Tell me, Tommy!" Ryan's voice was still harsh, in spite of his attempt to soften it.

"The yellow-haired woman who works in the Pine Tree," Tommy said, "threw it into the creek. I got it out. I wiped it dry and put oil on it. It belongs to me now."

Karen Halliday, leading the black and skirting the crowd came up to them. She stopped in front of Ryan. "You won your race," she said quietly. "Irv told me to tell you we'd be off the place in a day or two. Is that soon enough?"

Ryan didn't reply. He jerked the reins from her hand and stepped up into the saddle. The gelding felt his spurs and decided not to buck.

"Ryan!" Karen called after him.

But the black was lined out toward the canyon, running as he had run in the race a few moments before.

CANYON CITY was empty, its streets deserted as Ryan thundered up the hard-packed trail. He pulled the winded black into the hitching-rail in front of the Pine Tree and wrapped the lines loosely around the tooth-marked rail. He ran lightly up the steps and crossed the porch and batted the doors aside with his left hand and shoulder.

A single bartender, who had lost out on going to the races, presided behind the bar.

Ryan tramped across the floor and leaned an elbow on the bar, his black eyes snapping. "Where's the yellow-haired girl who works here?" he demanded. "Joe Pompano's lady friend."

The bartender jerked his thumb toward the stairway. "The girls sleep late."

Ryan headed for the stairway.

"Hey, you can't go up there!" called the bartender. "It's against the rules."

Ryan paused, half turned. He tossed a silver dollar on the counter. "Have yourself a drink, friend," he said softly, "while I make a new rule." He went up the stairs.

Ryan pounded on the first door he reached, and a girl's voice said, "Go away! I don't want any company."

"If you've got yellow hair," Ryan said, "open the door."

"Three doors down," the voice inside the room called. "Don't be in such a rush. Maybe I'll open the door."

Ryan went on, but he didn't knock on the third door down. Unceremoniously he pushed it open, stepped inside, and closed the door quickly. The yellow-haired girl stood there, dressed for traveling, with a worn carpetbag at her feet. As Ryan stood there staring at her in wonder, he asked himself why he had not realized before who she was.

She had been crying, and her face was streaked with make-up, and her eyes were red and weepy. She knew him at once.

"I—I've been expecting you," she whispered.

"For the love of God—" Ryan's voice was a hoarse whisper—"why'd you do it? Your brother—your own brother!"

She took a step backward and sat down on the bed, misery etched on her face. But horror was in her eyes as she realized what Ryan had said. With an agonized cry she threw herself face down on the bed.

"No!" she moaned. "No, Ryan! You can't think that—you mustn't! I'm bad but not that bad. I took Bern's gun, yes. But that was to keep him from killing Joe. I hadn't the least idea of what would happen. I swear it!"

"You didn't know Pompano would kill Bern—murder him? Is that it?" Ryan was fierce in his anger.

She shook her head wildly. "I didn't! I didn't!"

"What about your brother's money?" Ryan asked. "Did you help Joe spend that?"

Her shoulders shook. "He put it all on Halliday's sorrel," she whispered. "We were going to use the winnings to go away and start new somewhere—where—"

Ryan said in a terrible voice, "I'll leave you, Ida. I'll leave you to your memories.

They'll keep you company, all right, little girl. They'll always be with you no matter where you go, whether you're known or not. You've a lot of hell to go through, Ida Weston, before you go where Bern is now."

He closed the door and went down the stairs. Spectators from the race were beginning to come in from the flats. He brushed past those who entered the bar, went out the door, and crossed the street. When he entered the Parker House bar, it was empty, except for two or three townsmen. He glanced at them briefly and went on through the door into the lobby.

He climbed the stairs and knocked on Judge Yate's door.

The judge sat at his desk, peering stonily out at the great wall of rock that rose past his window. He said tiredly, "I've been expecting you, you pirate."

"Everyone's expecting me," Ryan said heavily. "Where's that agreement, Judge?"

The judge pointed to a tin box on his desk. "Your money, Irv's deed, and the agreement. All in that box." His head dropped forward on his chest. "I've got something to tell you, Ryan," he said almost inaudibly.

RYAN reached for the box. He opened it and got out the agreement. He tore it in tiny pieces and let them fall to the floor.

"The deal's off, Judge," he said. "All off. It's no go. You can tell Halliday that when you see him."

The judge's eyes were filled with amazement. "But your horse won, Ryan!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't matter that it wasn't the brown horse. Irv specifically said any horse or no horse. He was figuring, right up to the last minute, that he might race the horse that ran for you. Karen is part owner of that black gelding, you know. She and the Indian kid—"

"Yeah," Ryan said, "I know."

But he hadn't known. He hadn't known that Karen Halliday owned a part of the black gelding. Why had she done what she had? He asked himself this question as he crammed his money into his money belt. Not that it mattered, he told himself, remembering her look at him as she faced him at the edge of the crowd after the race, when she had so proudly said she and her

brother were ready to get off the Turkey Track Ranch.

He said over his shoulder, "See you in church," Judge."

"Wait!" the judge called. "Wait, Ryan. I've got to tell you something that's troubling me."

"Tell Father Flannigan," Ryan called back and closed the door behind him.

He had only one desire—to get as far away from Canyon City as he could in the shortest possible time. That he'd almost killed an innocent man had shocked him far more than he would have believed possible. He went down the hall—and stopped dead still at the top of the stairs. Karen Halliday looked steadily at him as he stood there, with her hand on the newel post.

"You're on your way to the ranch?" she asked.

Ryan nodded.

"I thought you'd give us a little time," she said, low-voiced, not looking at him.

"Time?" he snapped. "You've had two hours."

He went on down the stairs.

Three steps down he stopped and watched her hurry toward Judge Yates's door. He went slowly downstairs then, his heart heavy. He stopped again when he was halfway down—when he heard a shot. It came from the judge's room. He turned and raced back up the stairs. A hard, deadly voice halted him.

"Stand where you are, Ryan!"

Ryan whirled, his left hand dipping awkwardly downward. A shot ripped into the bannister. Splinters flew, and Ryan felt the bite of them as he thumbed back the hammer of his .45 and slipped a quick shot at Joe Pompano as the Turkey Track foreman came forward, firing as he came, his bullets thudding into the stairway around Ryan.

Ryan forced himself to act with deliberation. He shoved out his gun and its sights settled on the tobacco tag hanging from the pocket of Pompano's fancy shirt. His thumb slid smoothly off the hammer.

The tobacco tag disappeared as Pompano stumbled and went down. He fell on his face but rolled over and raised his gun. Ryan's next shot knocked him down against the floor, and this time he lay still, dying.

Ryan sat down on the stairs, blood running down his arm and forming a puddle on the steps. A few men ventured cautiously into the lobby, talking in low, hushed voices as they looked undecided from Pompano to Ryan. Somebody passed him on the stairs, but he paid no heed. Then—how long after he could not have said—an unforgettable perfume came to his nostrils, and Karen's hair brushed his cheek.

"You're all right, Ryan?" she asked shakily. She saw the blood then and gasped, "You've been shot!"

"That shot—that shot up there," Ryan said. "It saved my life. I'd have walked right into Pompano's gun if I hadn't heard it and turned just when I did."

She said softly through welling tears. "It was the judge, Sim. He told me—he showed me the agreement you tore up. He told me he saw that muleskinner, Muley Dawson cripple the brown mare. He needed money and he thought you'd lose out. He could have stopped Dawson but he didn't. He told me that, then he walked over to the window and shot himself. Doc Frazee's with him now. And I think he'll be all right."

"The poor old devil," Ryan said. "I'm sorry for him. I wish he hadn't done that."

She said wonderingly, "Sim, you really mean it!"

"Listen," he said earnestly, "I almost killed a man—Hey, here comes that damned Ashley and Irv."

She said firmly, "You let me do the talking. I want our partnership—yours and mine—to start out right, Sim. It might develop into a family business."

Sim Ryan smiled faintly. "I'm hoping," he said, getting to his feet. "But there's something I want to tell Irv. And I've got to apologize, too."

For the Best of the West, Read—

WEST



SATAN RULES

Jack Graydon's packet was carrying wounded soldiers on a mission of mercy, but he also had to fight off a vicious riverboat rival

I

YORK GRAYDON, on the texas deck of the Missouri River packet *North Wind*, felt the steady throb of stern-wheel paddles churning silted water and watched the swirl of the river in front of her bow. On his smooth-shaven young face was a frown as he considered the situation.

The river was dangerously low, even for May. Ripples eddying in the brown current indicated shallows and treacherous unseen sandbars. Here on the lower river, boatmen always had to contend with this low water at the tail end of the spring season, after the swell of melting winter snows had passed. After the thaw hit northwest peaks and glaciers, the annual "June rise" once more put life into the lagging steamboat traffic.

Adding to the trouble was the fact that the *North Wind* was riding low in water, wallowing under a heavy consignment of freight in the hold, and the added burden of near seven hundred wounded Union

soldiers, headed upriver for hospital camps in Iowa State. They overflowed the cabins and the saloon. Their bedrolls were scattered across the main deck and the hurricane. And looking at that jumble of sprawling, blue-uniformed men in varying stages of pain and helplessness, York Graydon knew the grim pull of responsibility.

He remembered the fate of another of his father's boats, the *Lucy Belle*. She had been loaded with wounded, too, the night her boilers blew. Not many had been saved. York went a little sick, picturing in his mind the horror that must have been on the river that night.

Dan Mitchell, captain of the *North Wind*, stepped out of the pilot house. He was a solid, red-faced man with a blue cloud of heavy beard showing beneath the skin of his jaw. Putting a sulphur match to his briar pipe, he gave York a brief nod above the flame.

There was no friendliness in him, and

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THE RIVER

A Novel by D. B. NEWTON

York Graydon sensed this. With a steamboat captain's jealous pride, Mitchell resented the presence of this younger man and his authority.

"*River Queen* pulling astern of us," Mitchell said.

York looked back, saw the craft. She was a big eight-boiler boat, her twin stacks belching smoke in a long, black scrawl across the bright sky. Sun striking the tawny river dazzled his eyes, but squinting against this he could see that the stretch of water between was quickly narrowing, that presently the *River Queen* would be pushing ahead of them.

SHE carried no wounded. She was a luxury boat and her owner, Will Butler, had no intention of cluttering her decks and cabins with troops. His passengers were all well-heeled civilian traffic, fleeing the holocaust of war and heading upriver to Montana and the gold camps. His holds contained cargo for Fort Benton, as well as for the Nebraska jump-off towns where bull trains waited to freight the river goods westward across the Overland Trail.

The Graydon Line had handled that Montana business once. Now, hampered by an army contract which old Tom Graydon had been too patriotic to refuse, it had been compelled to abandon that upriver trade and confine its boats to plying back and forth between St. Louis and the Iowa rest camps with its precious cargo of wounded men, and loading for the rest with what consignments could be picked up in the Nebraska ports.

Suddenly York Graydon's jaw tightened. A tall, slim figure had emerged from the pilot house of that other boat and stood staring across the water at him.

Will Butler was a darkly handsome man, with a look of power in his easy, spread-legged stance. The two boats were near enough that York could see the amused expression under the tipped-back visored cap, the twisted smile of the hard mouth beneath the clipped mustache. And Butler's voice sounded thin but clear across the slip of the intervening river, the throw of the engines.

"Having a hard time getting that rowboat upstream? Want us to throw you a towline?"

A muttered oath burst from Captain

Mitchell. Already the other craft was slipping past them.

Butler called back, "Try putting up a sail. Or throw another stick of firewood under the boilers—if you can find one."

His laugh floated across the churning, muddy water. From the decks of the *River Queen*, passengers and deckhands who had heard the taunts, waved and cat-called to the pair on the Texas of the slower boat. They were answered by angry shouts from the wounded troops lining the *North Wind's* rail.

York Graydon turned quickly, to see Mitchell's broad back set square with fury as the captain headed swiftly toward the pilot house. York swung around, following. As he stepped through the doorway he saw Mitchell, at the speaking tube, barking orders down to the engine room.

"Full speed, damn it! We'll show that—"

Graydon cut him off. "Don't be a fool! We'll have no racing with a load of wounded on board!"

The captain turned slowly. At the wheel the pilot was watching with detached interest. His presence gave a spur to Mitchell's already hurt pride.

"By hell, I'm still the captain of this boat!"

"I admit that," York answered quietly. "And that you know more about steamboating than I ever hope to, but—"

"Then quit giving me orders! I don't care if your old man does own the line I work for. That don't mean that a yellow, swell-headed—"

York hit him.

It was an instinctive movement, and it sent the older man slamming back against the wall of the pilot house, just missing the big wheel. The captain's cap fell from his curly head and he stood hunched there, chin thrust forward, his glare touched with astonishment that this slight-bodied youngster would have dared to tackle him. His big hands clenched. They looked big enough to break the owner's son in two.

But York Graydon eyed him and said evenly, "I would be yellow if I took that without an argument. Now, let's forget it. I don't want to fight or give orders to the best river man my father ever had on his boats. But can't you see Butler

was just goading us? He'd like to have us tie down the safety valve, throw lard on the fires and try to race him with this load we've got aboard! He'd like to see the *North Wind* go up like the *Lucy Belle* did!"

SLOWLY Mitchell's big hands opened. He was breathing hard, still glaring at the younger man. Then, twisting about, he grabbed the speaking tube, bellowed into it, "Forget what I said. Lay off the fires!" And without a word he shoved past York Graydon and his steps faded out along the texas deck.

York frowned, knowing relief, but also deep unhappiness. It had been humiliating for Captain Mitchell, and York respected and liked the man. He glanced at the pilot briefly, then slowly followed the captain out.

He knew what these cocky, gossip-loving river pilots were. At the finish of this run news would leak and spread all up and down the lower Missouri—the story of how young Graydon had had a run-in with Mitchell and the *North Wind's* captain had had to eat crow before his employer's son.

York dreaded that. There was trouble enough without dissension within the company. He could imagine Will Butler's arrogant face. He would welcome such news.

Butler was trying to smash the Graydons.

Flat, bushy banks continued to slip past as the boat crawled laboriously upstream against the tide. Sometimes, with a load like this and the tawny river so low, a boat had to resort to "double-tripping"—unloading half the cargo so as to raise the bottom in crossing a particularly shallow stretch, then dropping the rest of the load there and going back for the first half.

All such expedients took time, and time was something they couldn't spare. For not only did these wounded troops have to be taken to their hospital camps, but there was the freight in the hold. Already the stuff had been held up so long in the warehouse at St. Joe, waiting for the *North Wind* to find a chance to load it, that now it must be pushed through to its consignees at Nebraska Landing or the company would be faced with a bad situ-

ation indeed.

York Graydon paced the decks of the slow-moving packet, down the ladder to the hurricane deck where uniformed men lolled on their blankets. Some were smoking or playing cards or whittling, others were lying motionless with arms shading their eyes from the sun, enduring the pain from crudely bandaged wounds.

As York picked his way among them he met many a cool, impersonal stare. Behind those eyes, he knew, was the common thought: a likely piece of cannon fodder. Why ain't he in uniform, on one side or the other?

Face wooden, he went on his round. These men didn't know that York Graydon had been on his way to enlist with the Union Army when hurried news had reached him that his father, old Tom, had been wounded in a guerrilla attack on another Graydon boat, the *Lexington*. Now York, young, untried, resented by seasoned rivermen, had the whole weight of the Graydon responsibilities on his shoulders.

Old Tom was recuperating, slowly. The *Lexington* was in drydock, awaiting repairs for damages sustained in that guerrilla attack. The *Lucy Belle's* fragments lay on the Missouri River's bottom, result of an accident as mysterious as it was terrible, since there was no evidence that the boilers had been overworked when they exploded.

Only the *North Wind* was left of a once prosperous packet line. Because nothing must be allowed to happen to this last boat, York Graydon was riding it, keeping his own eye on the run of things—and winning the enmity of her captain.

Reaching the main deck, York saw that the boat was warping in toward the west bank where in a wood yard loomed up corded stacks of cottonwood and willow. It took thirty cords a day to feed the insatiable maw of a packet's boilers, and that meant frequent stops to replace the supply of fuel stacked around the engine room.

York didn't know why he suddenly remembered Will Butler's taunt, Throw another stick of firewood under the boilers—if you can find one! Surely that hadn't held any sinister meaning.

He knew the next moment—when he heard the yell of the woodhawk, calling

from the bank.

"Don't put in here! We're sold out."

"What do you mean, sold out?" Captain Mitchell bawled back across the water, as the pilot's bell rang and the boat drifted on idling engines.

"Nothing left but green wood!" came the shouted answer. "All the rest has been contracted and paid for!"

York Graydon had joined Mitchell at the forward rail. "By whom?" he demanded. "Will Butler?"

The woodhawk only turned away, without answering. York's face was grim as he turned to the scowling Dan Mitchell.

"How much wood have we got left in the ricks?"

"Not much," said the captain. "We'll try at the next yard."

II

AT THE next yard the answer was the same. Both York Graydon and Captain Mitchell knew what that meant. Will Butler, speeding upstream ahead of them in his lightly laden *River Queen*, was buying up every stick of dry firewood available, using money and threats to persuade every wood yard on the Lower Missouri not to do business with the rivals he was out to drive against the wall!

Their own differences momentarily forgotten in the face of this near disaster, York and the boat captain held a conference of war.

"Since Butler moved up here from New Orleans at the outbreak of hostilities, with his string of Mississippi boats, he's been set to break the Graydon Lines," York said, grimly. "We're the biggest and best-organized to resist his efforts to build a monopoly that will extend clear from St. Louis to the Montana ports. So far he's done all right. I'm positive he was behind the guerrilla raid that put my father in the hospital and the *Lexington* in the repair yard. If I could prove he had anything to do with that explosion on the *Lucy Belle*, I'd go after him with my bare hands!

"Now, if he can tie up the *North Wind* on this trip for lack of fuel, he probably figures he can steal the last of our consignment trade from us at Nebraska Landing. The next step will be an offer to buy us out, at his own figure!"

"We're burning up the last of our wood right now," growled Dan Mitchell. "I could warp in to the shore and send the crew out to chop some, but that's too slow, and green stuff won't burn." He added meaningly, "Of course, we could arm the crew and take what we need."

York shook his head. "They're probably just waiting for us to try that!"

"Only one other chance, then," declared the captain. "Ben Avery's yard is just ahead of us—around that timbered bend. He's a tough old rooster, and a good friend of the Graydon Lines. It would take a good lot to make him and his two boys sell us out. Maybe we can get enough wood from him to take us on to port."

"I'd forgotten Ben," York Graydon said, on a note of hope. "Yes, it *would* take more than threats to make that old woodhawk throw in with Butler's squeeze play. We'll give him a chance." He hesitated, added slowly, "And listen, Dan. About that trouble this morning—"

The harshness of Mitchell's face stopped him. There was a discoloration on the captain's bearded jaw where York's blow had struck. It turned darker now, as a surge of blood rushed into the steamboat captain's face.

"We won't talk about this morning," he grunted. "Not until we finish this run, anyway. When I get back to St. Joe, I intend to have a settling with Tom Graydon."

He turned sharply on his heel and strode away, leaving York alone beside the rail in the warm spring sunlight.

York felt the bunching of muscles along his jaw. He knew the captain meant to quit when this trip to Nebraska Landing and back was finished—Dan Mitchell, his father's best and most loyal boatman! A kind of sick despair flooded through young Graydon. Everything he had tried to do, in these weeks since taking over in his father's place, had gone wrong, had proved his youth, his incompetence and inexperience.

He simply did not know how to manage and keep the loyalty of men who were older and knew more than he did. To face the threat of Will Butler's ruthless ambitions, old Tom's sure hand was needed at the helm, and instead there was no one but a green youngster who bungled and

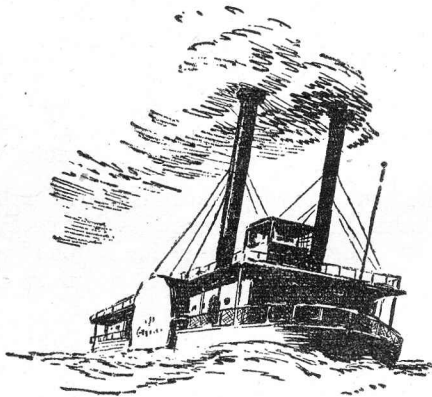
made worse every job he tackled.

Suddenly he whipped about toward the rail. The churning paddles were bringing the *North Wind* around the brush-choked bend in the river, and into sight of old Ben Avery's wood yard. And now York Graydon saw that it had, indeed, taken more than threats to break the old woodhawk's loyalty to the Graydons.

Flame and smoke were billowing up to the clear sky, from dry and quickly burning stacks of willow and cottonwood. And, as he stared transfixed at that scene of destruction, York heard again the dry crackle of gunfire.

EXCITEMENT seized everybody aboard the boat. The blasts of her whistle echoed from the low bluffs across the channel, and her prow was turned quickly toward the bank as the deckhands came running with firearms ready.

To York Graydon, in his impatience,



it seemed the slow-moving *North Wind* would never reach shore. He could see running figures limned against the burning stacks of wood, brandishing torches. He had a six-shooter from the pocket of his coat in his hand but the distance was too great for such gunfire.

When the blunt prow touched bank, he was over the rail, slipping to his knees in shallow water, then plunging up the bank with the crew behind him. The wounded soldiers were yelling encouragement from the decks. He almost stumbled over a prone, lifeless body, and recognized one of old Avery's bearded sons.

It was too late to save any of the wood stacks. They were going with a roar of

flame in dry timber, and so was the log hut where the woodhawk and his sons had lived.

Shooting had died almost completely the moment the boat nudged the bank. Off through the trees on the bluff York saw the sudden streaking plunge of mounted men.

As he brought his gun down for a running shot, a weapon crashed in a streak of flame, not twenty feet from him, and the bullet snarled past his bent shape. He hit the dirt, instinctively and, as he rolled, his gun muzzle came up and he flung a shot over. It was a lucky one. There was a threshing in the brush that ended almost before he came to his feet again. York moved forward cautiously, gun ready.

But the buck-brush clump was stained with red, and the sprawled body there had no life in it.

With distaste, York Graydon took hold and rolled it so that the ugly eyes stared up.

Captain Mitchel came running up behind him.

York asked him, "Know this man?"

Mitchell shook his head. "Some river tough. They come cheap enough, in these waterfront towns."

A weak shout came from the brush nearby. Moving over quickly they found one of the crew bending over old white-bearded Ben Avery. The woodhawk had been shot, but the smoking barrel of an old flintlock rifle beside him told he had kept up the fight to the last.

Mitchell knelt quickly, tore open the shirt to show the bullet-hole.

"He's tough and he's game," he muttered. "Maybe we can save him."

The old man's eyes wavered open. "My boys!" he muttered thickly. "They got both my boys! Charlie first, then Noah."

"Was it Butler?" demanded York sharply.

The old woodhawk's glance turned to him vaguely.

"Butler?" The bearded old man, face smudged with powdersmoke, shook his head feebly. "No, but he came upriver on one of his boats, couple hours ago. Wanted to buy up all my wood. I knew the *North Wind* would be along and I wouldn't sell."

"Then who raided you?"

"Jack Leech was giving the orders, the black-headed son of Satan! If I ever notch my sights on that ugly busted nose of his, I'll—"

The weak voice trailed off, the clenched hands, rock-hard from wrestling with saw and timber ax, went limp.

"Passed out!" grunted Dan Mitchell.

York straightened. "Jack Leech. I've heard of him. A guerrilla, isn't he?"

"That's right. Though not many along the River know him by sight. I guess old Avery would."

YORK stood still a moment, looking around. The westering sun touched the heads of cottonwood and willow, laid the shadow of the bluff far out upon the tawny river. He knew the wood racks on the *North Wind's* main deck were all but empty, and the last hope of refilling them had gone up in flame here at this raided wood yard. He shrugged heavily, turned to the boat captain.

"Guess you'd better get the old man on board and see if the Army doc can patch him up," he said to Mitchell. "And have graves dug for his sons."

"What are you going to do?" asked the captain.

"If I can locate a horse—maybe one the raiders left—I'm going on to Nebraska Landing. We've got to make some kind of arrangement about this cargo, or lose our business there entirely!"

Mitchell nodded sourly. His stolid face showed he still nursed resentment over that scene in the pilot house. He said, "These soldiers ain't going to be fond of the idea of tying up here for long, either."

York found a mount, tethered in the trees where Jack Leech's men had left him. It was an ugly, tough-mouthed brute, but he kicked it in the jaw and it settled down, headed north along the dim trails and towpaths that lined the River. Soon York hit a good wagon road and held to that at a steady clip, pointing toward the port town that was his goal.

The raiders had gone this way ahead of him, he was certain. He saw what looked like fresh tracks of a dozen broncs, and he could even smell the settled dust. But he caught no sight of them and did not want to. Odds of one against twelve were too high.

In the late evening he reached Nebraska

Landing, dusty, worn, and hungry. The little port, the bustling, busy center for the bull trains that pulled out for the Platte Valley trail and on to Colorado and the western Army posts, made a pattern of lights lifting up the bank from the log docks, where freight warehouses received their consignments from the holds of the river packets.

York Graydon rode directly for a large white house upon the bluff, the most pretentious dwelling the town could boast.

It was so situated as to command a fine view of the broad Missouri's arc, the hills on the Iowa side, the steamboats tied up at the dock below or trailing smoke majestically up or down the stream. York tied his borrowed horse to a hitch-post that had the shape of a little colored boy reaching to take the reins, and he went up the gravel path and across the deep veranda.

Lamplight from the windows lay upon the grassy lawn. At his knock a colored servant opened the wide door.

"Mr. Parmenter?" York asked.

He was let into a broad hall, where a hand-carved mahogany staircase curved upward into shadows. He had waited here only a moment, dusty hat in hands, when a tall, gaunt, white-haired man came in.

"Young Graydon, aren't you?" asked the man York recognized as Harry Parmenter. There was a question in his glance as he offered York a veined but hard and callused hand.

"This is a business call," York told him. "I'm sorry to break in upon your home, looking as I do, but it was urgent."

"Well, come in and have a drink first," the old freighter insisted. "Whatever your business is it can wait that long."

III

FOR all the wealth his enterprise had brought him, Harry Parmenter was the same large-mannered, unpolished frontiersman who had taken his first string team out on the old Cumberload Road forty years back. York Graydon knew he would be fair with any man, but if you won his displeasure, your name would stand for nothing in Nebraska Landing, or in any of the other freighting towns along the lower River. His influence was that great.

There had been a murmur of voices from the drawing room when York had entered, but it had broken off when the servant had gone in to announce a visitor. Now as he was ushered in ahead of his host, he halted just inside the tasseled doorway at sight of the two persons in the room.

The bright-haired girl who was seated in one of the big overstuffed chairs by the table with its crystal lamp, York knew was Harry Parmenter's granddaughter, Jean. York had met her once or twice before, briefly. He had thought then, and now thought again that she was one of the most attractive girls he had ever seen. In which idea he was not alone, for the heiress to the Parmenter's fortune was popular up and down the river.

But it was the other occupant of the room, the lean, darkly handsome man who stood with his shoulders against the mantlepiece, who really caught and held York's quickly sharpened glance. For the man was Will Butler!

At sight of the visitor, Butler straightened slowly, and an expression that was a mixture of puzzlement and anger flickered behind his glance. Quickly he concealed his annoyance. There were greetings, brief and noncommittal, between the two men. Jean Parmenter smiled and nodded to York impersonally, her glance taking in his trail-stained appearance.

York felt ill at ease in her presence and in the expensively furnished room, knowing that he needed a shave, that his clothing was mud-stained, and that he smelled of horse sweat. Then Harry Parmenter handed him a glass, and the taste of the liquor, and Butler's mocking glance, put a new recklessness in him.

"My business—" he began.

Parmenter said, "We can go to my study if you want."

"Not necessary. It won't take long, and if Miss Parmenter won't be bored I would as soon discuss it here." He finished his drink, went on crisply, "Mr. Parmenter, I won't be able to put your freight on the wharf within the time you gave me."

He saw quick displeasure darken the old man's eyes. "That sounds bad, Graydon. I don't like to be unfair, especially since I've done business with your father for years, and I know the hard luck that's been hitting him. But just the same—"

"It's more than hard luck! Someone is working deliberately to break the Graydon Lines. He hasn't stopped at anything—not even murder. Oh, no," he added quickly, as Parmenter started to interrupt, "I'm not making any charges, not in public. I haven't any proof. But—" and his eye was steady on Butler's suddenly scowling face—"I know what I know. And my enemy knows I am on to him."

"The *North Wind* is tied up downriver tonight, with seven hundred wounded Union troops on board, and unable to move because the only wood yard where I could have bought fuel was burned and its owner killed by this certain person's hirelings." He did not think it best to let Butler know Ben Avery had escaped death, and had identified the attackers. "If you want your freight, Parmenter, I'm afraid you'll have to send wagons and teams down there tomorrow and haul it in. I'll pay the additional expense, and at least it will get your freight here within the specified time."

Harry Parmenter was pacing the thick-napped carpet. His granddaughter, worry in her eyes, was looking from one to the other of the three men, her head tilted back to show the lovely line of her throat, her bright curls glinting in the lamplight.

The old freighter said, "I'll send a string of wagons down the river road first thing in the morning. But can't you come out in the open, if you have any charges to make? The proof can wait till later."

YORK said, "I'm sorry. There are reasons why this is hardly the time or place for naming names. But I can promise you this—if anything should be done to harm the *North Wind* while she lies helpless and loaded to the hilt with wounded troops, or if anything is done to prevent your teams from getting that freight from her hold and up here to Nebraska Landing then, proof or no proof, I'll take the matter up myself with the guilty party!"

Will Butler said smoothly, over the flame he held to the tip of a long, thin cigar between his hard lips, "You're looking straight at me, Graydon! And I don't like it."

He shook out the match, dropped it into the fireplace and removed the cigar from his mouth. His eyes bored challengingly into York's.

"Speak your mind," he went on. "Cheap insinuations aren't gaining you anything. You're trying to make something out of the fact that I've been buying all the wood I can find on the Lower Missouri. Of course I have, for there's been bad Indian trouble between here and Fort Benton and a lot of the woodhawks have been massacred or scared out. I can't take a chance of not picking up enough fuel along the way to get my boats to Montana and back. But I defy you to prove me a criminal on no better grounds than this!"

Stunned by the shrewd manner in which Will Butler had turned that duel of wits against him, York could only stare for a moment, his tired, stubbled face white, his hands clenched. Jean Parmenter had risen from her chair, one slim hand pressed against her throat. Something glinted brightly and York's glance flicked that way quickly, held by what he saw there. On a finger of that hand, her left, the girl was wearing a large, sparkling diamond.

He had heard that Will Butler was making his play to win old Harry Parmenter's granddaughter. He saw now how far the thing had already gone. But sight of that ring sealed York Graydon's lips. There were some things a guest simply could not allow himself to say.

His voice was tight as he repeated lamely, "I'm not mentioning any names or making any charges!" And, turning to Harry Parmenter, "You'll send your wagons out tomorrow?"

The old man, stony of face, nodded curtly. After a few mumbled good nights then, and brief thanks for the drink that had been served him, York Graydon found himself outside on the veranda of the white house above the river, the cool night breeze soothing against his face.

Would he never play his cards right? Would he ever cease to be a blunderer and a hopeless young fool? There, in that drawing room, Will Butler had handled him with supreme adroitness. He had called for a showdown with York Graydon and York had been forced to back away.

He knew Harry Parmenter well enough to understand that the old two-fisted bull train man had only contempt for one who failed to follow through on a thing as serious as the charges York had been making, even though the man accused might be be-

trothed to old Harry's own granddaughter. But with no basis of proof, there was nothing York could have said. The result had been complete victory for Butler, and maybe, before the wind-up of the affair, the loss to Graydon Lines of Harry Parmenter's consignment business, a fatal blow at a time like this.

And yet, as he swung to saddle and rode in dark mood down the path to the center of the little river town below the bluffs, York Graydon wondered why the principal thing he took away with him from that ugly scene was the shocked look in Jean Parmenter's clear brown eyes, and the mocking glitter of Butler's stone upon her hand.

Nevertheless, his mind was working ahead, hunting a solution to the immediate problems that faced him. He had something to eat in a waterfront beanery, found a cheap hotel and checked in there for the night. Tired as he was, it was late before he slept, and he rose while the sun was only a rosy gleam through the mists that hugged the broad river.

AFTER three hours of searching among the warehouses on the docks, he found what he wanted—a portable sawmill that had been shipped in by some hopeful who had expected to make his fortune supplying ties for the proposed Union Pacific Railroad west of Omaha. The outbreak of the Civil War had ended railroading activity before it began, and the sawmill had found its way into the dusty shadows of this river port warehouse and been forgotten.

York Graydon paid a good sum for it, and also picked up a pair of oxen for the wartime price of a hundred and fifty dollars. Then he went down to the wharf and chartered space on a downgoing steamer which was leaving for St. Louis with almost empty decks.

He did not see Will Butler that morning, but he did meet Harry Parmenter on the docks, and the old man went past him without a nod or a word of recognition. York Graydon's jaw hardened. Plain to see the old man had taken offense at his actions last night.

But though losing Parmenter's business, if it came to that, could prove the final blow for the already crippled steamboat line, York moved doggedly ahead. He was

at the rail of the hurricane deck when the boat carrying his sawmill and oxen swung away from the dock and turned her nose downstream. It made good time, heading with the silty current. In hardly more than an hour York's searching glance sighted the *North Wind* tied up to the green bank at Avery's burned-out wood yard.

The scars of the fire showed blackly. And the freight wagons had arrived. Gang planks were down, and deckhands were at work unloading the boat's cargo and transferring it to the bull wagons Parmenter had sent, using the wood yard's level shingle as a loading dock.

A vague feeling of relief went through York Graydon as he saw that there had been no further mishap during his absence. He hardly knew what he had expected. More than likely, Will Butler considered he already had his competitors licked and would let things rest a while as they stood. Maybe when he learned about this sawmill he would change his mind, would realize that, poor as was the showing this green youngster had so far made in fighting back, he at least had an idea or two of his own.

The boat on which York had arrived idled in toward shore, threw out planks and tied up long enough for the sawmill to be deposited on the mud bank and the oxen to be driven off. It left at once, and Dan Mitchell joined Graydon, a question in his glance.

York told him, "I thought we had better find a way to make ourselves independent of the wood yards. With this on board we can swing out a stage when we sight a likely looking stand of timber, run the oxen ashore and drag a few big sticks aboard. Then we can saw it up as needed."

He saw new respect in the sharp glance of the captain. "Good idea," Mitchell said grudgingly. He added, "How about hiring old Ben Avery to run it for us? His sons are gone, and he himself won't be in any shape to swing an ax for a long time."

"I was thinking of that," York agreed.

The Army doctor, he learned, had done a good job of patching up the bullet-hole in the old woodhawk. For the time being, though unable to do any work, he could at least supervise the running of the mill, being familiar with the machinery.

Quickly Mitchell had part of his crew felling timber for the mill, and their axes

rang across the quiet of the afternoon. The last of the freight had been discharged and was rolling away in the bull wagons. On deck York found the temper of the wounded troops wearing thin under this enforced layover, so he passed out word that they would be pulling away shortly.

THE whine of the saw blade began presently, and the short lengths of firewood started piling up in the ricks about the engine room door. They had managed to keep the boilers warm, so soon a head of steam started to build and toward sunset the haze of smoke trailing from her stacks thickened and the chimneys rolled billowing black. Ragged cheers went up from the troops as the *North Wind* pulled away from the shore and once more headed upstream.

It was a clear moonlit night and, despite the threat of sandbars, the pilot said he could handle the boat all right. Dan Mitchell was anxious to push ahead and make up the lost time. It would be possible to save some now by by-passing Nebraska Landing, hitting instead straight for the town on the Iowa side where their Army passengers would debark.

York Graydon had told Mitchell a little about the scene with Parmenter and Butler. He said, "Butler admitted buying the wood, but he had some halfway plausible excuse that impressed the old man. When we stop at Nebraska Landing on the down-trip, I'll go in and see Parmenter. But I have a premonition the news is going to be bad."

IV

TWO days later, when the *North Wind* nosed into the Nebraska Landing wharf, she carried another boatload of troops. These men were convalescents who had completed their stay at the hospital camps and were headed for St. Louis and, from there, would rejoin their units in the field.

While some of them were still stiff from newly mended wounds, others were filled with high spirits and with the mounting tension of returning to the battlefields. Almost before the planks were put ashore, they hit them and went rampaging into the riverfront town, uniformed and yelling men in groups and knots. They had a two-hour lay-over and were heading for the

grog shops, with a soldier's feverish intent to make the most of every free moment in every new town that came his way.

York Graydon, musing that but for the turn of events in which he had been caught up that he himself would have been a soldier in blue at this moment, maybe dead on some Virginia battlefield, went along to Harry Parmenter's office at one end of the great freight warehouse. When he came away fifteen minutes later, a tight white line was drawn about his clean-shaven mouth.

It had been just as he expected. Old Parmenter had hemmed and hawed a little, then had come bluntly to the point.

"I've been in business a good many years," he'd said, "and I've always noticed when a man's luck sours, it don't get better. You had three boats; one blew up, one's disabled, and the one that's left don't keep to her schedules. I can't afford to tie my business in with that kind of a losing proposition."

York had said stiffly, "We won't be held up any more for lack of wood."

"Everybody in town's heard about your sawmill idea—pretty clever, too," the old man had admitted, but he had not budged an inch. "It'll be something else next. I've told you, it's a matter of luck running sour."

"Or of plain crookedness!" Graydon had retorted, getting angry. His words had had the wrong effect on the old freighter.

"More wild accusations! They won't change my mind! I've decided to turn all future consignment business over to Mr. Butler who, after all, is practically a member of the family. I'm sorry, Graydon, but I don't think this leaves much more for us to talk about at the moment."

"No, it doesn't!" York Graydon had snapped. "Except that this isn't putting us off the river. Long as Graydon Lines own a piece of a boat big enough to float, we're operating. And the next piece of 'bad luck' somebody pushes off on us will be the last they have a chance to try!"

As soon as the door had slammed behind him, however, he had known that talk sounded bigger than it was.

And he knew well enough that when the news got around that Parmenter's business had been withdrawn from the Graydon's, that other consignments would become mighty hard to get. Even with boat-

ing scarce on the Lower Missouri, due to the war, other Nebraska freighters would be chary about trusting their cargo to Graydon bottoms now—the jinx would scare them off.

Meanwhile, the line was losing money on the head rates the Army paid for transporting soldiers to and from the Iowa camps. They were moving into the red slowly but surely if, indeed, something didn't happen first to wreck the *North Wind*, the Graydon's only surviving boat.

York was on his way down to the dock when two men suddenly came tumbling out of a grog shop doorway a dozen feet ahead of him. They were big, bearded men who looked like a tough pair of bullwhackers, and they were fighting. Graydon hauled up, a little startled, one hand dipping instinctively to the gun in a pocket of his coat.

Fists smacked meatily against flesh. Suddenly one of the brawling pair went down. Supine on his back, he began pawing for a holstered gun. Past the spread-legged, broadshouldered stance of the other man, York saw him drag the weapon out, saw the black muzzle of it tipping—

JUST in time he leaped aside. The bullet slapped into the clapboard side of a building, dead center to where York had been standing a moment before. He saw chagrin in the black eyes of the downed man staring squarely into his own. Recklessness surged through young Graydon then and he was lunging forward, pocket lining ripping as he jerked the sights of his gun free.

The other brawler whirled quickly. The one on the ground leveled for a second shot at York but his companion in this murder setup blocked him and he had to hold his fire. York had his own weapon out. He loosed a shot at the prostrate figure, his bullet gouging up dust near the man's elbow. Then his foot slipped on a rounded stone and he was thrown off-balance momentarily.

In the same instant a chopping blow descended on his wrist and the gun flew from numbed fingers. A fist scorched against his face, driving him back. He caught himself, facing the second bullwhacker. The man was a head taller, pounds heavier than York. But York, caution thrown aside in the satisfaction of at last facing some tangi-

ble enemy whom he could strike and hurt, drove forward.

He heard the man's grunt as his fists smashed against barrel chest, against stubbled jaw. The man gave back a step. A huge, craggy fist arched around against the side of York's head with a jar that sent pain ringing like a bell inside him. He was no match for this man, he knew with returning reason. And now the man with the gun was on his feet again, circling.

Desperately York danced aside, trying to free himself as he shook his head to clear it. Next moment the barrel of the gun came at him in a clubbing blow that he could not duck.

The earth received him, not unconscious, but unable for the moment to command his pain-numbed body. Waiting like that for a shot to finish him, he heard as from a great distance voices shouting, the report of another gun. Then he pushed up to a sitting position, his head splitting, and saw that his assailants had vanished.

Blue uniforms swam before his eyes and a voice said, "It's that slacker from the boat."

He saw sergeant's chevrons, saw a meaty pugnacious face above the unbuttoned tunic. He saw a couple of other soldiers and in their eyes read a faint contempt.

The noncom said shortly, "We was heading back for the steamboat and seen them two working on you. They scattered like quail when they seen the Army coming."

York was on his feet now, swaying a little. There was blood on his scalp where the gun-barrel had torn it.

He said dully, "Thanks. That pair was put there to try and kill me. They faked a fight, and one of them pulled a gun."

But again he had no proof—certainly no way to trace this back to Will Butler. Butler, he had learned from making discreet inquiries, was out of town. He had hired a mount and ridden away that morning, shortly before the *North Wind* tied up. And since the hired assassins had made their escape, there wouldn't be any chance of finding them.

One of the soldiers handed Graydon his gun and he dropped it into the torn pocket of his coat. Then the trio turned their backs on him and, because there was nothing else to do, he followed them down the slanting streets to where the boat made its

scrawl of smoke across the sky, at the log wharf.

The hour of departure was near and the soldiers were drifting back in twos and threes, an officer checking a roster as they filed on board. York went to his cabin and washed the blood from his face, decided the slight wound made by the gun-barrel was not serious.

In the saloon he found the soldiers gathered in noisy confusion.

The ship's clerk passing him, said, "A passenger yonder, going down with us as far as St. Joe."

York saw the back of a man leaning against the bar. Stocky, black-haired, he had a carpetbag at his feet and seemed extremely solicitous of it.

YORK stepped out on deck. In a moment Captain Mitchell would be giving orders for the gangplank to be raised, the boat to shove off on the downriver journey. Then York Graydon saw something that filled him with astonishment. On the dock a light buggy and team were coming to a halt, a colored driver holding the reins. From the back seat gaunt, white-haired Harry Parmenter was stepping down and reaching out a hand to his granddaughter, Jean.

Afternoon sunlight found bright gold in her hair as the girl came lightly out of the buggy. Both she and the old man were dressed for traveling, Jean carrying a small parasol over her shoulders. As they crossed to the *North Wind's* gangplank, the colored servant followed, hands filled with luggage.

Coming on deck they were met by Captain Mitchell. York Graydon kept in the background. Parmenter said, "I want to book passage for myself and my granddaughter."

Whatever Mitchell was thinking, he kept his thoughts concealed behind his stolid face, but his cheeks flushed a little.

"There's a pretty rough crowd aboard," he said stiffly, but they won't be apt to bother you in the ladies' cabin, aft."

Graydon couldn't resist the temptation to make a dry remark. "We should be flattered," he spoke up quietly, "that you'd risk your life, and the young lady's as well, on a boat that is no longer safe enough to entrust with your cargo!"

The old man whipped around toward

him, and Jean Parmenter's wide eyes were on him, too.

"You can be sure, the old man snapped, "I wouldn't take your boat if there was any other available. Word just reached us on a northbound packet that Miss Parmenter's mother has been taken ill in Westport. We had no choice."

"I trust you'll have a smooth voyage," said York, turned his back on the pair and walked away, leaving the captain to deal with them.

He was in a sour mood as, with bells ringing, the boat reversed her engines, backed into midstream and started southward down the current. Suddenly he realized that part of this was due to an unwanted, nagging anxiety.

Somehow the presence of Jean Parmenter on board altered the whole setup, increased his already strong uneasiness. Perhaps nothing would happen on this trip, but on the other hand the ambush attempt back there in Nebraska Landing proved that Will Butler was impatient, was pushing ahead to be rid of his rival.

York Graydon could not feel complacency about this trip downriver. A strong premonition of disaster rode with him.

Prodded by it, he prowled restlessly as the *North Wind* slipped easily down the current. With empty holds, sandbars and low water would give no trouble this time. On the main deck he found the ricks low of wood, and old Ben Avery sitting comfortably beside the portable mill, a swathe of white bandages across his thin chest. He was recovering well from the bullet that had wounded him. Nearby the oxen were munching hay that had been piled on deck for them.

York told the old man, "We'll be pulling to shore at your old wood yard, in an hour or so, and sending out the oxen to haul in a big pile of stuff the crew cut and left here. Then you can start that saw working through it."

V

OLD Avery had a pipe in his mouth, and the long-barreled rifle was leaning beside him against a bulkhead. He reached a gnarled old hand, patted the shining blade of the saw.

"I'm getting right attached to this critter," he grunted. "Too bad my boys ain't

here to see it. Sure beats thunder out of hewing 'em out with a hand ax."

In the saloon York found the air blue with tobacco smoke and the soldiers noisy in their roistering. He looked for the civilian passenger who had come aboard at Nebraska Landing, didn't find him. Uniformed men lined the bar, and boisterous card games were in progress. Then, alone at a corner table, York spotted a thin, tow-headed young private who sat hunched forward, starting at his bony hands. He looked sick and York saw his hands twitch nervously.

Something sent Graydon over to drop into the cushioned seat beside him. He said pleasantly, "Aren't you drinking, friend? Or does the boat upset you a little?"

The young soldier glanced at him quickly with tortured eyes. He seemed to be a year or so younger than York. Suddenly his lips were quivering and his bony fists clenched convulsively. All at once York knew the man was deathly afraid.

He wished he had said nothing. But now the young fellow was panting, "They send you back! They patch you up and send you back into that—living hell! How much do they think a man can take?"

The skin of his gaunt cheeks was stretched in a spasm of horror, and sweat stood in great beads across his bony forehead.

Something made York say, "You had two hours on shore, back there. You could have found a place to hide, surely. And there are bull trains pulling out every day into the wilderness, where no questions are ever asked."

The soldier lifted his head slowly, stared. "You mean—desert?" He shook his head slowly. "You got to face it through. And the worst is not knowing whether you'll be able to stand up to it the second time. A man can't run away from that." His thin face hardened suddenly, and York could read his thoughts as his glance took in this able-bodied man in civilian clothes. "Maybe you don't know what I'm talking about!"

There it was again, York thought heavily. It was becoming constantly harder to endure. He felt an impulse to justify himself, to explain to this scared young man the circumstances that kept him out of uniform. But such excuses would be flip-

pant and meaningless in the face of this young private's anguish of spirit.

So without answering he pushed to his feet abruptly and went through the crowd toward the sun-filled doorway, frowning.

At the bar the loud voice of the sergeant was saying, "This damned guerrilla raider they call Jack Leech is one bucko I'd like to notch my sights on. He calls himself a Johnny Reb, but he ain't on either side. He's just out to grab what he can."

"Heard his boys derailed a train of cars on the Hannibal and St. Joe last week," another put in. "And they hit a river boat along here somewheres, couple of months ago."

York lost their voices as he stepped out on deck. He was thinking, for the hundredth dark time, Why don't I give it up? It's a losing fight—why stick it out? Why not enlist when I reach St. Louis, get into uniform where I belong?

But then he remembered what the private had said, "You got to face it through!" It gave him strength and courage, suddenly, and a kind of patience. If that scared youngster could head back into the horror of the battlefield, then York Graydon could carry on his own personal war to the last ditch fight.

The nation's bigger trouble could wait. It wasn't going to end tomorrow. There would be plenty of time yet for him to get into it. Meanwhile, this was his job to do.

While he was in the saloon, the boat had put to shore at Avery's burned-out wood yard where a pile of logs lay on the bank ready to be hauled aboard. A stage had been put out and deckhands were taking the oxen off with chains to do the job.

HE SAW Jean Parmenter at the rail, her bright hair a nimbus in the sunlight as she looked down at the work on shore. Her head lifted and she saw York Graydon. He thought she would turn her back on him, but instead she nodded hesitantly and something drew him across the deck to her side.

"Hello."

Graydon had never spoken to her before, never been alone with her or close enough to see that the brown of her eyes had flecks of golden light in them. But her nearness had a disturbing effect upon him now.

She said, "I'm afraid you weren't glad to

see us come aboard your boat."

"I don't want anything to happen with you on deck, Miss Parmenter."

Jean Parmenter looked at him directly. "You think Will Butler cares that little for my safety?"

He pointed out, as bluntly, "Perhaps you forget. Butler isn't aware you're traveling with us. He left town this morning, and you didn't decide to come aboard until the last minute."

A brittle silence followed his words. The girl's hand lay on the railing between them, and the stab of sunlight from the diamond ring seemed to bring Will Butler into their presence—an intrusion that made this conversation doubly difficult.

She must have felt it, for she jerked her hand from the rail, suddenly turned, and moved away in the shadow of the deck. York hesitated for a moment, then went after her.

"Now that I've started," he insisted doggedly, "I'm going to finish saying this—though it means talking about a man behind his back, and I can't blame you for hating me. But it's for your own good, Miss Parmenter."

She said nothing, but did not look at him, and her step faltered.

He plunged ahead, "Before you—set the date with Butler, please try to think over just exactly how much you know about him. He came up to St. Louis at the outbreak of the war, and he brought two Mississippi sidewheelers with him. Where did he get them?"

She did stop now, whirled to face him, staring. "What are you saying?"

"Again, nothing I can prove. But I do know this. There never was any Will Butler operating a steamer line out of New Orleans before the war started. Moreover, this *River Queen* of his is an old luxury boat, the *Cotton Queen*, renamed. If you look closely, next time, you'll see where the new name has been painted in on her sides. My father knew her owner, personally, and there has been no word from the man since the confusion that followed the outbreak of the war."

Jean Parmenter's shoulders rose and fell under the tumult of her emotions. "Will must have bought the boat."

"I sincerely hope he did," York said, bluntly.

Suddenly her hand came against his

cheek in a blow that stung, and anger was ablaze in her eyes as she stepped back, the hand still raised.

"You cad!" she whispered breathlessly. "Do you think I will listen to such insinuations about—about the man—"

The imprint of her hand was white against the sudden color that flushed his face.

Woodenly he answered her, "I knew you would be angry. But I had to say it, for your sake, and I know at least you aren't apt to forget. You'll at least think over what I've told you. That's all I ask!"

From the bank at which the *North Wind* rested the voices of the deckhands floated through the silence that engulfed them. The patient oxen had dragged half of the felled timbers onto the deck and were returning down the gangplank for more.

"Down there," said York grimly, "are the graves of two fine young men who were murdered at someone's orders to prevent the *North Wind* from meeting her schedules. The actual killing was done by a gang led by a man you may have heard of—Jack Leech. A dirty freebooting guerrilla, a black-haired, broken-nosed scallaway."

YORK'S voice choked off. Ahead of them, the passenger from Nebraska Landing had stepped to the railing. He still clutched his carpetbag, and he was peering intently toward the brushy shore, as though searching for something there. Just then he glanced at York Graydon, and for the first time Graydon caught sight of his swarthy, battered features.

A name burst from York's lips in a choking cry. Hearing it Jack Leech whirled from the rail, hesitating for just an instant, with fury in his narrow eyes. Suddenly he turned and started running.

Sight of the guerrilla leader on board the *North Wind* had been a numbing shock whose meaning held York Graydon paralyzed. He broke free of this and was digging for his gun as he lunged past the girl, when a sudden confusion of yells and gunfire broke out upon the bank below, halting him.

From nowhere, it seemed, men had sprung out of the brush—a motley bearded crowd, some wearing parts of cast-off Confederate or Northern uniforms. There must have been thirty or

more of them. Some were firing into the wood crew as the deckhands scattered for cover, pinning them down against the bank where one or two already lay dead under the first volley of fire. The rest of the guerrillas were storming up the gangplank, onto the lower deck, into the face of gunfire from the engine-room. The attackers were far too many to be held by that.

Yells had broken out upon the boat. Boots were pounding the decks. York turned to the girl.

"Get to your cabin!" he ordered.

Jean stood there, swaying slightly, horror in her lovely face. The raiders would be storming up the ladder in a moment, heading for the pilot house. With a grunt of exasperation, York swooped and picked up the frightened girl bodily, ran with her toward the rear of the boat.

Surprisingly how light she seemed. The door of the cabin swung open as he reached it, and Harry Parmenter started out. York set the girl down, thrust her into the old man's arm.

"Take care of her!" he shouted, above the growing racket of gunfire. "And both of you keep under cover. It's the whole Leech gang that wrecked the *Lexington*."

Then he was hurrying forward, gun in hand, to meet the rush of the attackers up the ladder from below.

Grimly he shot at a yelling, bearded face and saw the man fall back against those behind him. But his place was taken immediately as the guerrillas swarmed onto the saloon deck. Iron rungs of the ladder clattering under their boots as they stormed up to take over the river packet!

VI

YORK GRAYDON fired until his gun was empty, then hurled himself flat against a bulkhead out of the storm of bullets that came at him. Frantically he groped in his pocket for gelatine-covered cartridges and percussion caps. Dan Mitchell, hurrying down from the hurricane, took a slug squarely. York saw him tumble down the ladder, losing his visored cap. The sight turned York Graydon sick inside.

A good man, Captain Dan Mitchell, even if he did have more than a little contempt for the younger Graydon.

York got the last shell rammed home and the final cap in place, then came lunging up to his feet as the deck was fairly flooded with the attackers. He thumbed the hammer as he dived forward, recklessly. One of them loomed before him, so close he could see the flaring bloodshot eyes and catch the sour stench of whisky. He swung with the barrel of his gun, felt it smash bone and saw the man fall.

A slug scorched by him, the gun smashing almost in his ear. He whirled to face a big redhead in a Confederate cavalryman's forage cap—stolen headgear—that was two sizes too small. The smoking muzzle was on him for another shot and and York tried desperately, hopelessly, to get his own gun up.

He knew he would never make it. Then a falling body lurched against the redhead, ruining his aim. The bullet skewered harmlessly into trampled deck timbers. York's left fist arched quickly, smashed against the bridge of the man's nose and the redhead dropped.

Side-stepping, York Graydon looked ahead and saw an amazing sight.

The raiders had run head-on into a tide of blue uniformed men who came pouring out of the bar. The big sergeant was leading them, yelling wild oaths as he laid into the guerrillas. Only a few of the soldiers had guns available, but the rest had their fists and some had grabbed bottles, chairs, bung starters, and came wading in with those, and with the zest of fighters long out of battle.

York dropped a guerrilla just as he was about to put a bullet into the big sergeant. Then the groups joined in a medley of yells and gunfire and thudding fists. For a moment there was only wild and swirling confusion, but then it became apparent that these were odds greater than the raiders had expected to buck, and greater than they could stand against.

The blue tide pressed forward as the guerrillas gave way slowly. His gun empty, York waded ahead through acrid powdersmoke, flailing with his empty weapon, trying to avoid the fallen bodies of the attackers underfoot.

There was a splash far below, then another.

Pressed back against the *North Wind's* ornate railing, the guerrillas were breaking, tearing free of their opponents to hurl

themselves overboard. Some hit with great force in the shallow water and stayed there. Others managed to stagger up and scramble, drenched and staggering, up the bank. All at once it was a raid no longer. Thanks to the unexpected intervention of the troops, it now was a badly turned rout.

As York mopped sweat and blood from his face, he saw the grinning face of the sergeant who had led them.

"Good fighting, bucko!" the noncom yelled at him, and in his eyes was no contempt.

Then York sighted another face he knew, a tow-headed private who only a half hour ago had sat alone at a table in the saloon and trembled with fear. He was trembling no longer, though his tunic was half ripped from him and one bony hand that swung a broken chair leg had a bloody bullet scratch across it. Instead, the youngster's head was up, his eyes shining, and he was laughing aloud, with new-found confidence in his own strength and courage.

He's licked his problem, York Graydon thought grimly. Maybe there's hope for me.

AT THAT moment, turning toward the ladder leading to the main deck, he glimpsed a familiar pair of shoulders disappearing down it.

York forgot his gun was empty. He forgot everything but the need to stop that man. He ran for the ladder, hit the bloody top rung of it just as his man was heading for the door of the engine-room. Everything was strangely quiet, there on the main deck.

York's voice cracked sharply as he called, "*Leech!*"

Jack Leech turned. He had a gun in one hand, the carpetbag in the other. His gun came up and fired, just as York snapped trigger on a spent cartridge.

A heavy blow hit York in the shoulder. He slammed against the bulkhead and crumpled on the ladder, dizziness overwhelming him. The battered features of the guerrilla leader were twisted in a snarl as he made ready to shoot again.

Then the look flattened out to baffled surprise. He took one step, stumbled, fell headlong. Old Ben Avery came limping with the long-barreled flintlock smoking

in his grip, a look of savage triumph on his face.

"That settled for my two boys!" he snarled.

Weak and sick, York got to his feet and stumbled down the ladder, over the body of one of the raiders who had fallen there. Leech was dead. But York Graydon picked up the carpetbag that the man had guarded so carefully. He opened it, shook out a piece of cordwood.

Old Avery stared at him. "What's it mean?"

York frowned at the stick, not comprehending. He turned it over, looked at the ends. Then he saw the fuse, and the plug. He pried them out, and from the carefully hollowed interior poured black powder into the palm of his hand.

"Good God!" the old woodhawk gasped. "If that went on the fire, it could've blown the bottom out of the boat!"

"Explains the fate of the *Lucy Belle*," York said grimly. "Slipped in with the stacked wood, the man who planted it there would have plenty of time to leave the boat before the explosion. Probably Butler didn't want to use the same idea twice if he could help it, but Leech came prepared. He was working in Butler's pay, of course. They knew we would be stopping here for that wood we had cut, so they watched for us, Leech shipping with the boat to cover this end of things. He didn't know there was anyone aboard who knew him, by sight or description. When he saw the soldiers he tried to signal his men to hold off. But I interrupted him and they came ahead. That's one guerrilla gang that's busted wide open now!"

Old Avery asked, "And how about that Butler crook? Does he get off scot free again?"

York Garydon was staring thoughtfully toward the bank, and the trees and brush that crowned it. "You know," he said slowly, "I have an idea Butler's up there somewhere, waiting to see if Leech gets the job done with his powder!"

Then he was running down the gangplank to the shore, groping for the last of the spare shells in his pocket as he went. Behind him he heard old Avery's alarmed voice, "Son, you look out! You'll walk right into a bullet!"

Ramming cartridges into his gun and placing caps, he hurried on, up the mud

bank, past the wood crew and the oxen. Two men were dead here, two more to tally in the score of Butler's crimes. York's shoulder throbbed and it was bleeding, but he could still use a gun.

He went straight toward the greenery that crowned the low bluff, leaning forward now against the steep pitch as he climbed, peering ahead, searching that screen of leaves and branches.

The last survivor of Leech's gang had long since scattered. Likely Will Butler had escaped too. Once again, York realized, with deadening futility, that there would be nothing to show for this, no proof of the man's guilt. Nothing to prevent another attempt against the Graydon Lines which could well be the final and fatal one. A great discouragement filled York's tired and aching body.

THEN, only yards to his left, there was a stirring in the cottonwood branches at the top of the bluff. Swiveling in that direction York had a glimpse of a mount tethered there. At the same moment Will Butler stepped into view.

Sardonic amusement twisted the hard mouth beneath its clipped mustache. The gun was level in the man's lean fingers.

"Right here, greenhorn!" he said. And coming right in to get it, aren't you?"

York twisted, trying without much hope to bring his gun around in time to beat that point-blank aim. His thoughts were a blur, centering on Butler's mocking, handsome face. He was dimly aware that, even as he snapped the hammer, his heel slipped and he was spilling down, hard, against the muddy slope. Then the weapon bucked against his palm, against his hurt shoulder. . . .

"It was Butler?" asked Harry Parmenter sharply.

York Graydon nodded. "I stumbled and he missed his first shot at me. Mine was luckier."

Graydon didn't want to talk. He felt sick, drained of strength. It had seemed to take forever, getting back to the boat. He couldn't even clearly remember climbing the ladder here to his cabin.

The Army doctor, tearing away the blood-soaked coat and shirt from York's shoulder, muttered something about fools for luck. York winced a couple of times under the prodding of his steel-hard fing-

ers. He had asked about the soldiers who had pitched in to drive off Leech's gang. There were some busted heads, a bullet wound or two, but nothing serious. Graydon was tremendously relieved.

It was also good to see Dan Mitchell on on his feet. One of the captain's arms was out of commission for the time being, but he was able to take command again of the *North Wind*. York, looking at the stolid, stubborn face of the boat captain, saw the mark of the blow he had thrown at the man yesterday.

He said bluntly, "I'm sorry about hitting you, Dan."

The captain colored a little. "I'm sorry I talked the way I did," he grunted. "I deserved to get hit. You're all man, Graydon. I'm—proud to work for you."

His broad, homely face split in a slow grin. York's tired smile answered him. He said, "I'll shake with you on that. When we're both mended a little, I'll lift a drink with you in the bar!"

"Good enough!"

The door closed behind the captain's broad back. York sat on the edge of the bunk, feeling the throb of the engines in the deck beneath his feet as the boat slipped downstream. There was silence while the doctor did his work. Then Harry

Parmenter cleared his throat noisily.

"I reckon I owe some apologies, too. Everything you said about Butler turned out to be right. I was too blind to see it."

"You're not to blame," York Graydon said. "The man covered up too well and talked too easy. He—" Graydon looked briefly from the old man to the pretty girl beside him, and looked away again. He swallowed. "I'm sorry, Jean, it had to be me that—"

Her hand was on his arm quickly. "Don't say that," she begged earnestly. "There's no reason to blame yourself. Thank you for showing me the truth—in time!"

York looked at the hand. It was her left, and he realized suddenly that the diamond ring was missing. She had already torn it off, maybe thrown it overboard into the swirling, muddy river below.

He lifted his head quickly. In her eyes he saw there were no tears, no regrets—only friendliness as her lovely, gold-flecked glances met his own.

Somewhere he found the courage to put his own hand on the one that touched his arm. She let it remain there. A small thing, that meeting of fingers, but it held its promise.

5 Novels Featured Next Issue



WEST FROM TEXAS

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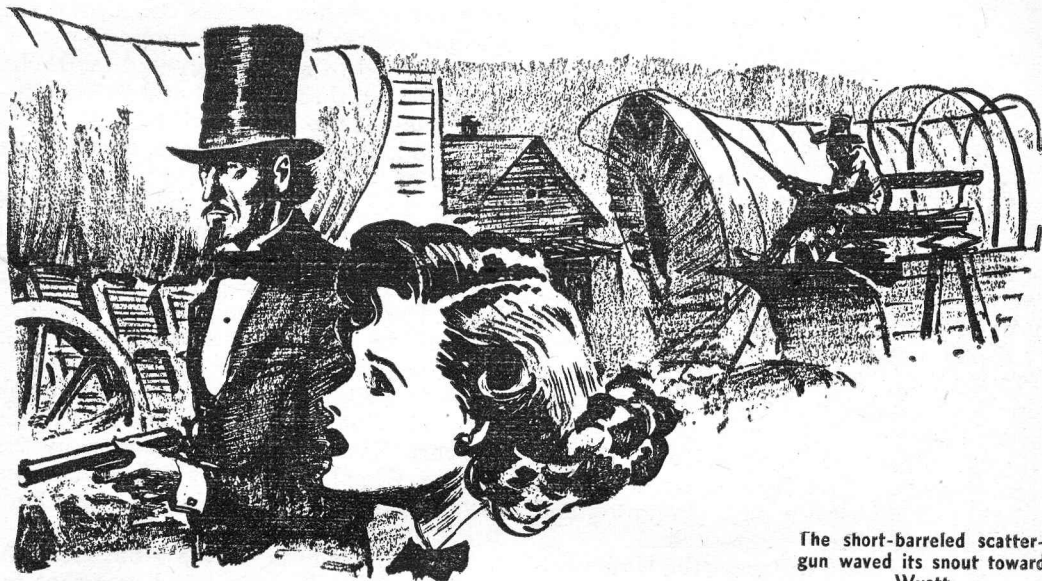


It was a journey of the dead—that road to Santa Fe—as

Dex Ashley tried to save his father's freighting caravan!

TRAIN

A Novel by ED EARL REPP



The short-barreled scatter-gun waved its snout toward Wyatt

I

DEX ASHLEY curbed his army mount at the tie-rack before the Santa Fé-Southern Freight office on the muddy main street of the town of Independence, and gave a sigh of relief that his long journey lay behind him. Since before dawn he had been in the saddle, riding through chaparral and sand and tall grass, burned by blazing sun and drenched under sudden rains.

The eagerness evident in his pale gray eyes softened the hardness underlining his lean face as he cuffed back his dust-caked range hat and watched the swaying freight wagons ahead. They crawled along the soggy street behind straining mules and oxen, their broad-tired wheels leaving deep ruts in their wake.

The little trail town's outward appear-

ance, Dex Ashley thought, hardly justified the wild tales that had reached him as far away as Texas.

Behind him sounded the distant, hoarse whistle of a river packet just coming in from the St. Louis run. It was a magic signal that brought people out of the nondescript huddle of canvas and frame buildings that lined both sides of the street, and sent them hurrying along the board walks toward the river landing.

Dex Ashley studied these people. For they were Independence, and Independence had erupted into life with their appearance. Each trip the river boat brought more greenhorns, traders, and adventurers in search of the fleshpots awaiting them. The wise ones would make arrangements to join some outgoing caravan. The

foolish would stay in Independence until their money was gone, then beg their way to Sante Fé through the kindness of some short-handed wagon master.

WATCHING the flow of buckskin-clad scouts and trappers, of lanky Missourians in homespun jeans and shirts, of curious, serious-faced Indians, of homesick greenhorns eager for a sight of their own kind, Dex mused, the start of the *Jornado del Muerto*. The Journey of the Dead that I've been hearing so much about. And Dad sends his wagons to make it. I reckon there's a lot he can tell me—if he will.

The glow in Dex Ashley's eyes was snuffed out at thought of his father. His memory slid back five years to that stormy scene when they had parted with angry words, and silence since then had held unbroken to this very day.

A man named Lincoln had been elected President of the United States, and a furious South, fighting to hold her slaves, had turned guns on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Dex had disagreed with the seceding states. Dex Senior, wealthy, and proud of his vast Virginia plantation and his slaves, had been plain-spoken.

"No son of mine will wear the Union colors and fight his own kin!" he'd said angrily. "I forbid it, Dex! Join the accursed Yankees, and I'll disown you."

"This goes deeper than just words," Dex had told him. "It's a matter of principle, Dad, and nobody can change my way of thinking. I've seen black people starved and beaten and forced to work like animals in the field. I've never liked it. I'm going to fight for what I think is right. Every human being has the right to consider himself any man's equal, and this war will prove it."

His father had looked at Dex coldly and repeated his words with even more force.

True to his word, Dex had donned the Union blue and had fought in the rout of Bull Run. He had still been fighting when Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

Purchasing his army horse, guns and saddle when he was mustered out of the service, he had gone home to find the place ravaged by the war. Dex Senior had disappeared. Months of wandering over his father's backtrail had led Dex to Independence. And now before him was his father's freight office!

Across the street a girl came out of the general store, and Dex watched her with quickened interest. The full skirts of her figured calico dress were gathered tightly about her trim waist, and she filled out the dress in all the proper places. She hesitated at the board walk's edge, patently seeking a way to cross the quagmire that was the wagon-rutted street. Dex saw only part of her averted face, but the glimpse set his heart to thumping.

He turned to a buckskin-clad man who was sloshing through the mud to his tethered pony at the hitch-rack beside Dex.

"Who is the girl over there, mister?" he asked.

The man swung into saddle. He sat there, eying Dex up and down, taking in dust-caked hat, blue army shirt, faded denim pants, and battered high-heeled boots. For a moment he stared at the worn butt of the .44-caliber service pistol tied down on Dex's thigh.

"Only a pilgrim in these parts would ask that question," he finally said. "That's Barbara Sayers, the new singer in the Wagon Wheel. Better lay off. Conestoga Wyatt's done staked his claim there. Don't try to jump it, mister. It ain't healthy."

The man's words started a hot gleam in Dex's eyes, and in his mind was that familiar wild impulse to buck the traces when told something was unobtainable. Four years of war had left deep marks in his way of thinking, and Dex was the first to admit it.

Wheeling his big Morgan, Dex slogged it through the fetlock-deep mud to the other side of the street alongside the girl. She looked up at him, almost taking his breath away. She had been pretty five years ago when he had last seen her. She was beautiful now.

"Reckon I can be of service, Babs," he drawled. "I'll carry you across the street on Inkspot, here, if you're willing."

"Dex Ashley!" Barbara Sayers exclaimed, a sudden joy lighting her face.

THEN quickly it faded away, to be replaced by aloofness, and Dex knew she was remembering that day, five years ago, too. His break with everybody had been clean, even with the girl who had promised to marry him.

"Things have changed," she murmured coolly. "What brings you out here?"

Dex knew she would crawl across that muddy street before accepting help from him so, leaning over in his saddle, he caught her about the waist. With one long arm he swept her up on Inkspot with him, his pulses racing madly at her nearness and her softness.

"Get it off your chest, Babs," he urged, turning the Morgan's head toward the board walk across the street, and acutely aware of the fragrance of the long black curly hair that brushed across his face. "Go ahead and cuss me out. I reckon I've got it coming."

"No, Dex," she said, and as he stared into her eyes, he was startled at the understanding he saw in their blue depths. "You were right about the slaves and the war. I've wanted to tell you that for months. Only it's too late now."

"It's never been too late, Babs," Dex said softly, reaching for the gold ring that had been his mother's and which now hung around his tanned neck on a cord. "Wear this again and we'll take up where we left off."

The big black halted in the middle of the street at Dex's pressure on the reins. Up and down the board walks curious people gathered to stare.

"No, Dex," the girl repeated, pushing away the proffered ring. She held up her slim hand, and Dex saw the huge diamond that glittered on her finger. "I'm engaged to Conestoga Wyatt. We'll be married soon."

"That remains to be seen," Dex said coolly. His grip tightened around her waist. "Right now I'm claiming the kiss I've dreamed about all these months."

Her lips were soft and warm under his own. She tried to squirm out of his grasp. Freeing a hand, she slapped him on his tanned cheek, the white imprint made by her hand turning red as the blood rushed to his skin.

A bull-like bellow sounded from the freight office before them.

"That was a mistake," Barbara warned. "You'd better put me down and get out of here. Conestoga Wyatt saw you kiss me." There was real fear in her husky voice. "Please go, Dex! He'll kill you for this!"

"Maybe," Dex said thinly, and the wintry bleakness of years of war was in his pale eyes as the Morgan slogged forward again. "I've heard a lot about Conestoga

Wyatt. I reckon we'd tangle sooner or later. I'll stick around and meet the gent, Babs."

There was so much to talk about, he thought, irritated at this Conestoga Wyatt's intervention. Babs had been glad to see him. It had been there in her eyes. But why was she out here in this wild country? Why was she singing in a cheap saloon? Her family had been as wealthy as his own before the war, and they had been neighbors. There were so many questions to be answered.

Dex determined to get all the answers, as he deposited Babs on the boardwalk, then swung down off his horse beside her. And in his nostrils was the lingering fragrance of the perfume she wore, another haunting reminder of the past.

Conestoga Wyatt came plowing through the crowd of curious spectators rimming the street, like a shaggy buffalo bull charging through a crop of new-born calves. The massive bulk of the man was unbelievable. There was not an ounce of fat on his six-foot frame, and the greasy, smoke-blackened buckskins that covered him seemed to be bursting at the seams because of the bulging muscle stretching them.

HIS flaming red hair tumbled down about his thick shoulders from under a broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat. His close-set yellow eyes blazed furiously.

"I'm going to give you the whipping of your life, pilgrim!" he bellowed in a voice that reminded Dex of the deep whistle of the stern-wheeler on the river back of them. "I'll break every bone in your body for kissing my girl!"

The giant rolled forward, as light on his high-heeled boots as a trained boxer, but more like some wild jungle beast pouncing on its prey. Spreading his long legs, Dex set himself for the man's attack.

A thin, erect figure suddenly popped up between them, a man in a worn black broadcloth business suit and black stove-pipe hat. His snow-white spade beard and low, bushy burnsidcs covered most of his thin, aristocratic face. Shocked, Dex stared at him. Five years had changed his father a lot. Dex, Senior's hair had been coal-black before the war, as black as Dex's own.

"Leave him alone, Wyatt!" Dex Senior ordered coldly, as Wyatt came to a sudden halt. "He's my son. He knew Barbara Sayers back in Virginia. After he learns of the situation here, he won't bother her again."

"Your cub, eh?" Wyatt rumbled thickly, a certain pleasure wreathing his beefy face. "That means nothing to me, Ashley. Get out of my way! I'm going to whip him so's he'll be marked for life. When anybody sees him after this, they'll think twice before fooling with Conestoga Wyatt's woman."

"No," Dex Senior said in a tone that reminded Dex of the days when his father had ordered his slaves around. "Lay a hand on him, and you'll answer to me. I'll dismiss you, Wyatt!"

II

GROWLING with fury. Wyatt moved fast. One hamlike arm swung around and caught Dex Senior across the chest, flinging him backward into the hitch-rack where the oldster collapsed as his head struck a post. As Dex leaped to his father's side, he heard Barbara Sayers' high-pitched scream.

Before he could see how badly his father was injured, Wyatt was on him. One of those huge hands grasped Dex's shirt at the collar and lifted him upright as if he were a child. One of Wyatt's knees crashed into Dex's middle with agonizing impact, sending a wave of pain over his body and robbing him of his strength. His legs folded under him and, as he fell into the watery mud of the street, one of Wyatt's fists jolted his face with the force of a sledge-hammer.

Through pain-dazed eyes, Dex dimly saw the giant preparing to leap upon him. He tried to draw up his paralyzed body to avoid the attack, but his muscles felt like water. Helplessly he lay there.

"That's enough, Wyatt!" a voice cracked out. "Fight fair, or I'll send a load of buck-shot through you!"

That voice! Dex would have recognized it anywhere. His pain-filled eyes focused on the tall man who, clad in the somber black frock coat and high-topped beaver hat of a gambling man, faced Conestoga Wyatt.

"Lieutenant Mansfield!" Dex mumbled

weakly. What stroke of fortune could have brought an old Army friend to his rescue at this moment?

"No," Mansfield said shortly to Dex, his dead eyes watching the menacing Wyatt above the mirthless grin that twisted his thin lips. "Not Lieutenant Mansfield. The name is Silver Dollar Mansfield now, Sergeant Ashley."

The short-barreled scatter gun that swiveled on the leather harness strapped about Mansfield's slim body under his long coat weaved its ugly snout in Wyatt's direction.

"Barring your dirty fighting, Wyatt, this fellow can lick you. I'll see that you keep it clean. No stomping, no biting, and no help from your friends if he whips you. I'll shoot the first man who interferes!"

Wyatt stared at the soft-spoken man, hatred written in every line of his broad face. Then he turned his attention to Dex who was crawling to his feet.

Dex Ashley was a tall young man with a big-boned frame that bore promise of a strapping man to come, in full maturity. His movements were languid and smooth, yet there was a catlike quality underlying them as he stepped onto firm ground, apparently recovered from Wyatt's treacherous attack.

Sneering, Wyatt slid forward to meet him. The giant's eyes blinked in amazement as Dex sidestepped his charge and deftly whipped a looping right into his barrel-shaped stomach. His breath whistling out of him in a loud grunt, Wyatt stopped dead in his tracks, watching the lazily moving figure before him with sudden respect.

Still weak from the foul blow, Dex put all of his ebbing strength into that maul. His fist felt shattered against Wyatt's oak-ribbed middle, and the shock of the blow tingled back up his arm and shoulders. Wyatt cursed furiously and again rolled forward.

There was no time and no solid ground under Dex's feet for the footwork needed to evade the giant's swift rush. One of those hamlike fists scraped his head, and Dex's slick-soled boots slipped under him as he tried to back away. Before he regained his balance, Wyatt was on him.

Rock-hard fists ground into Dex's temple with terrific force. His brain spun crazily as he weaved on rubbery legs that

refused to support him. More blows rained at him, and each felt as if it were tearing his body apart. Wyatt's grinning face loomed hazily before his dimming vision, and Dex knew the feeble jabs he poked in its direction were futile.

His knees gave way, and he crumpled into the mud.

"Pick both men up, Wyatt," Mansfield ordered in his cold voice, and the click of the eared-back hammers of his double-barreled shotgun sounded loud in the stillness. "Carry them inside the freight office. Any tricks and I'll blow the top of your head off, mister!"

CONESTOGA WYATT was no fool. The smirk left his loose, cruel mouth, and sweat popped out on his forehead. He was close to death and he knew it. Silver Dollar Mansfield had eared back the hammers of his shotgun just three times since coming to Independence that spring. Three men had died before the lethal blasts of those sawed-off muzzles.

Scooping up an unconscious Ashley under each arm, Wyatt entered the Santa Fé Southern Freight office, and Silver Dollar Mansfield tailed him closely. The crowd scattered before them so they could pass through, then began drifting away now that the fight was over.

"Put them over there," Mansfield ordered, motioning with his left hand toward the two crude, hide-covered benches in the large waiting room.

Wyatt did as he was told.

"Now get the devil out of here," Mansfield said, and the knuckles of his right hand showed white as they gripped the shotgun. "If this lad and his old man don't come out of this, Wyatt, I'll come looking for you. Savvy?"

Conestoga Wyatt's bravery was unquestioned from the Rockies to the Mississippi, but it was not foolhardy courage. He stared at those deadly twin muzzles menacing him from under Mansfield's long coat, and nodded his shaggy red head.

"I savvy," he said, and hatred flamed in the depths of his yellow eyes.

He slipped out the door.

A large Indian gourd filled with water hung from a bare rafter by the door. Slipping it off the hook, Mansfield doused its contents into Dex's face, then into his father's.

Dex came out of it first. Opening his eyes, he stared at the bare rafters overhead, dazedly trying to figure out where he was and what had happened. His head throbbed sickeningly, and when he struggled to a sitting position on the bench, his body and legs felt as if they were being torn off him.

"Take it easy, Dex," Mansfield murmured, wiping the water off Dex Senior's face with a spotless white handkerchief from his coat pocket. "Your father isn't hurt badly. He's coming to now."

Dex Senior sat up, tenderly feeling with one blue-veined hand the lump behind his right ear.

"You had better go, Dex," he muttered. "You bring nothing but trouble, and heaven knows we have enough trouble already."

Speechless, Dex stared at his father, noting the wrinkles lining his worn face and the worried look haunting the faded eyes, seeing the weary sag of those once-proud shoulders. He refused to believe that now patches held together the clothing of a man once famed for his immaculate dress.

"I've been a year finding you," he said. "Are you asking me to ride on?"

"Yes," his father replied, and the pride Dex remembered so well began to glow in his eyes. "You and your Yankees ruined my plantation. What you couldn't use, you put to the torch. I salvaged what I could and moved out here where no man could order me around. And now you come along, bringing memories I want to forget."

Silence seemed to settle like hoar frost over the waiting room as Dex and his father stared at each other. Dex had his pride, too, and a temper still ragged around the edges from the months of grueling conflict.

"If that's the way you want it, I'll keep away from you," he finally said. "But you're making a mistake, Dad. We fought a war to settle our differences, and we won it. Let's forget the past."

The weary slump of the old man's shoulders disappeared as he jumped to his feet, his thin face livid with rage.

"Get out!" he choked. Balling his thin white hands into fists, he lifted them as if to strike Dex. "Get out of my sight, you Yankee swine! I never want to see you again!"

The bleakness in Dex's eyes deepened. "You can take your rag-tag business and go to thunder," he said frostily. "Trail talk had it that your back was to the wall, that you could use a fighting man. I thought you'd welcome me back, and be glad to have me helping you buck whatever's got you licked. I see I was wrong, so I'll be moving on."

WITHOUT a backward glance at his father, Dex heeled about toward the door, and there was no compromise in his squared shoulders. Silent as a ghost, Silver Dollar Mansfield swung along beside him.

Dex stopped in the doorway for a second, seeing the teeming life that surged up and down the street through bitter eyes, knowing that from now on he was part of it—restless, hard, driven on and on to new horizons and new adventures. Callously he put aside the hopes and plans of the past months, the hopes that had revolved about his father and a business—a new start in a new world. They were not for him.

"Wait, son!" Dex Senior cried, as the muffled sound of a shot came from across the street. A bullet hummed by Dex's temple, etching a thin line of crimson along its path.

Dex's battle-sharpened reflexes caused him to swing his pistol up out of holster before he realized that there was no one at whom to trigger. There were many people on the street, and the sniper could be any one of them. Beside him, Silver Dollar Mansfield held his cocked scatter gun on the level, dead eyes alert and searching.

"Conestoga Wyatt isn't wasting any time," Mansfield said drily. "Ten to one that shot was fired by one of his men from the top floor of the Wagon Wheel across the street. If Wyatt himself had lined sights on you, Dex, you'd be dead."

"What proof have you?" Dex asked. It was hard to believe that Wyatt would try to kill him, or hire a man to shoot him, yet he had to admit that Wyatt was the only man in Independence who had any reason to put him out of the way.

Mansfield laughed shortly. "A man in my trade hears things. Wyatt's behind a lot around here. Few people know it, and there's no proof."

Dex Senior had stood there listening to them, doubt and worry clouding his face.

"You were right, son," he said contritely. "My back is to the wall. Knowing I was about to lose the last cent I have has almost driven me crazy. Heaven knows, I can use your help."

Apologies came hard to Dex Senior, and his son realized just how difficult it had been for his crusty old father to utter them.

"I'll do all I can," he promised. His fingers closed about his father's thin hand in a firm handclasp. "Where do I start?"

"I don't know," the oldster admitted. "When I opened this office two years ago, I bought twenty new wagons and two hundred head of mules and oxen. Drivers could be hired cheap, and I got off to a good start. I had goods shipped here from St. Louis by boat, hauled it to Santa Fé and sold or traded it there for buffalo hides and prime beaver pelves. I made money, Dex. Lots of it. I bought more wagons, good ones. Murphys, Conestogas, Shuttlers. It was my brag that I had the best outfit and the best drivers on the trail. That was before the lower trace—that's the shortcut to Santa Fé across the desert from the Cimmaron Crossing—became known as the *Jornada del Muerto*, the Journey of the Dead."

THE haunted look that appeared in his father's eyes made Dex's fingers itch to use his gun on somebody's skull.

"Just a year ago," Dex Senior went on, "all hell broke loose. White renegades or Indians began looting the caravans. I lost wagons—merchandise—freight—anything I tried to haul. So did every trader out here. Drivers were killed, wagons burned, stock run off. It just about broke me.

"I hired Conestoga Wyatt to run my wagons through when it first started. If any man on the plains knows Indians, it's Wyatt, yet he can't stop them. Each trip costs me more wagons and mules and equipment, and I have to keep buying more. I'm sending my last wagon train out at daybreak in the morning, son. If it doesn't reach Santa Fé, and make the return trip here to Independence, I'm finished. So are a lot of other people."

"Who is going to push your wagons over the *Jornada del Muerto* for you?" Silver

Dollar Mansfield asked softly, with a quick glance at Dex.

"Wyatt," Dex Senior said, and broke off his words as he remembered his dismissal of the man.

Dex winced at the helpless look that settled over his father's seamed face.

"There's nobody left," the oldster muttered vacantly. "Conestoga Wyatt is the only man who would take the job."

"No," Dex said quietly. "Your wagon train leaves in the morning, and I'm going to give the orders, Dad."

"You don't know the trail," his father objected.

MORNING AFTER



"I've been around, but I've never been hung,"

Said the young bandido and rover—

"That may be true," the Sheriff rejoined,

"But golly, have you been hung over!"

—Pecos Pete

"I can follow old tracks," Dex came back.

"This town's getting dull," Silver Dollar Mansfield said coldly. "I'll tag along." A faint glow of amusement lit the gambler's dead eyes. "I'll be taking orders from you this time, Dex, and I have a hunch that you'll need me before the trip is over."

III

SILENCE and expectancy lay over the Santa Fé-Southern Freight camp as Dex Ashley and his father and Silver Dollar Mansfield rode into the huge lot along the river's edge half a mile west of town. Mule pens and sheds steamed under the blazing afternoon sun that was drying the rain-soaked ground.

Over a dozen men loitered about the huge piles of harness and wagon gear that littered the ground. They watched the three riders indifferently.

"Just as I figured it," Mansfield murmured. "These gents have heard that Conestoga Wyatt has been fired. You'll have to put them to work or hire a new crew, Dex."

"If they won't work for me," Dex said, eying the fifteen bulky, freshly painted wagons lined up in a neat row to the left of the sheds, "I'll send them back to Wyatt and we'll hire new men. The wagons will be loaded tonight."

Swinging down off the big black, Dex faced the watching teamsters.

"These wagons roll in the morning," he told them, aware that their sharp glances took in the marks of battle on his face.

His lips were puffed and cut so that he slurred his words, and his left eye was swollen shut. Dried street mud caked his clothing, for he had had no time to change into clean shirt and pants. Movement of any kind was still torment to his aching body.

"Wyatt won't be pushing this outfit this trip," he went on firmly. "I will. Anybody got any objections?"

The men looked at each other, uncertainty written all over their whiskered faces.

"I reckon not, mister," a lanky Missouriian muttered. "Your pay's the same as Wyatt's."

"Good," Dex said.

He pumped the man's horny hand, and each of the other men's hands in succession. And none of their steely clasps matched the strength of his lean fingers. A faint respect glowed in the eyes of those teamsters.

"Hitch up and start running your wagons down to the warehouse," he ordered. "I'll have men there to help you. When each wagon is loaded, bring it back to this lot. I'll see you here."

Sensing the uncertainty among the men at Dex's show of authority, Dex Senior spoke up.

"Whatever my son says is all right with me. You are to follow his orders, men."

As the teamsters moved about the lot, Dex Senior watched a couple of them approach the mule herd that grazed in the far end of the big pasture.

"I can't help suspecting that I've bought some of those mules several times," he said. "It makes sense now."

"What do you mean?" Dex asked curiously.

A hard grin bent the corners of Silver Dollar Mansfield's thin lips.

"I let Wyatt buy new stock and wagons after a train was raided each trip," the oldster said bitterly. "He always purchased them from the Missouri Outfitters, a combination store, blacksmith shop and livery barn. Several times I heard rumors that Wyatt owned the store. I've probably bought my own outfit over and over. It all adds up, Dex."

"You should've listened to those rumors," Silver Dollar Mansfield murmured. "Wyatt has made suckers of a lot of you. He's played it slick. He owns the store and he owns the Wagon Wheel Saloon. While you traders drink his liquor and let slip when you're sending valuable goods to Santa Fé, Wyatt lays his plans. I don't know what they are, but I can guess."

Mansfield chuckled grimly. "He hires out to lead your wagons across the lower trace into one of his traps. His men dress up like Indians and massacre every man, woman and child in the party. Then they drive your wagons away, probably somewhere up the Missouri, unload the goods and dispose of them. They repaint the wagons and float them back down here to Independence on flatboats. They drive the stock back and sell it over again at Wyatt's store, and nobody is the wiser. That's been going on for months, but nobody can prove it!"

DEX SENIOR stared suspiciously at Mansfield. "Where did you get this information?"

"That's my business," Mansfield said, "but you can accept it as true."

"Can't you mark the wagons?" young Dex asked.

"I've tried everything," his father said helplessly. "I've burned my brand on my wagons before each trip and examined the new wagons each time we bought them. If they are the same, the brand had disappeared."

Dex eyed the huge wheels of the new wagons. Strolling over to a tool box, he picked up a chisel and heavy hammer. Mansfield watched him out of those cold,

dead eyes, while Dex's father was openly curious.

"I never thought of that!" the oldster exclaimed.

Dex pounded an iron band off one of the big hubs of a wheel. Chiseling a rough cross inside the band, Dex pounded the band back on the wheel.

"We'll mark each wagon," he told them. "If they fail to come back from this trip, maybe the proof we're needing will be found on the next batch of new wagons for sale in Wyatt's store."

The big clock on the wall in the freight office chimed twelve that night before the wagons were loaded with their rich cargo of precious cloth goods, hardware worth its weight in gold, guns and powder and lead, and foodstuffs prized at the other end of the trail. All this and much more was stowed tightly under the big Osna-burg sheets that protected the wagons from the rain. Five thousand dollars' worth of merchandise rode in each wagon bed.

When the wagons were all back at the lot at the edge of town, Dex posted guards about the camp.

"Answer no questions and shoot the first man who tries to snoop around," he told them. "If any of the rest of you want to celebrate your last night in town, go ahead, but show up here at daybreak."

Turning to his father, Dex asked the question that had been in his mind all afternoon.

"Why is Babs Sayers working at the Wagon Wheel, Dad?"

"I can't answer that, son," Dex Senior said. "I offered to get her back home after her father's wagons were wiped out on the trail. She lost her father and younger brother. Scalped before her eyes, Dex. Wyatt managed to escape with Babs. But she wouldn't accept help from me. That girl has changed a lot. She got a singing job in the Wagon Wheel and has gone her own way ever since."

Dex mounted Inksport and sat there in his McClellan saddle looking down at the men about the campfire.

"Where are you going?" his father asked.

"To the Wagon Wheel," Dex said slowly. "I'm going to have a talk with Babs."

"You can't!" his father said hastily. "You'll run into Conestoga Wyatt there,

"You won't get away with a whole hide this time."

"I've got to see Babs," Dex said again, and there was that in the words that stopped further argument.

Bringing his two pearl-handled pistols out of their shoulder hideouts, Silver Dollar Mansfield examined their loads carefully, then returned them to their holsters. He checked his shotgun.

"I'll tag along," he said coldly, swinging into his own saddle.

Pushing through the batwings of the Wagon Wheel, Dex Ashley cast an alert, danger-keened glance over the spacious barroom, feeling the hot, lusty breath of the place envelop him. Twenty-four hours a day the Wagon Wheel was open, and seldom were the bar and gaming tables deserted.

Blue-denimed river men, punchers in levis, buckskin-clad mountain men and trappers, pilgrims in store clothes, all were there, along with the smell of strong whisky and leather and stale tobacco smoke and unwashed bodies.

"Watch yourself," Mansfield whispered beside Dex. "Wyatt has a dozen or more toughs planted here all the time. One word from him and they'll salt you away pronto."

Dex's lean face tautened. "I'm looking for Babs," he said stonily, "but I won't dodge trouble."

HE SAW the girl then, standing by the piano in the rear of the room. She said something to the piano player, and music drifted through the din of clinking glasses and roulette wheels and loud talk. She turned to face the room and saw Dex standing in the doorway watching her. Her face whitened, and one hand flew up to her throat. The music broke off abruptly.

She met Dex before he had taken a dozen steps toward her. A sudden hush descended over the big room. Everybody had heard of this stranger's fight with Conestoga Wyatt over Babs Sayer.

"You crazy fool!" she whispered, guiding him toward a table by the soft pressure of her hand. "I knew you'd come here."

If Wyatt were in the Wagon Wheel, he failed to present himself. Somewhere in the room a dance hall girl giggled nervous-

ly, and as if the shrill laugh had been a signal, the normal hubbub of the place rose to the bare rafters overhead again. But a lot of people covertly watched Dex Ashley and the girl at the table. When word reached Conestoga Wyatt, death might strike viciously.

Unnoticed, Silver Dollar Mansfield slid into an empty spot at the rear end of the polished bar that ran the length of the barroom.

"Why did you turn down Dad's offer to help you leave here?" Dex asked grimly, acutely aware of Babs' dark beauty, hardly daring to believe that she actually was across the table from him.

The girl was slow in answering, and Dex ordered whisky from the waiter who paused beside their table. Babs ordered water. The drink was deposited before Dex, and he drank it down at a gulp before Babs spoke.

"There's something wrong here, Dex," she said bitterly. "Somebody's got to stop it. Innocent men and women and children slaughtered out there on the trail, wagons burned and everything stolen, yet there are always a few people who manage to come back to tell us about it."

"Wyatt always comes back," Dex said. Babs' words tallied with the suspicion that had been in his mind ever since that afternoon.

"Yes," Babs said softly, leaning across the table so that Dex could barely hear her voice. "I should have been murdered along with my brother, and Dad. Your father told you about it, didn't he? Wyatt rescued me too easily. I've suspected him ever since, Dex, and I've learned things."

"What things?" Dex asked, hoping to hear conclusive evidence.

The flickering lamplight played across her face, and Dex saw weariness etched there under her stage make-up.

"Wyatt owns this place," she said. "He gave me this job. He owns the outfitting store, too. Lots of men work for him and they're coming and going all the time. And he keeps it all secret. If this town knew the truth, Dex, he wouldn't live long."

"Why don't you tell them?" Dex asked impatiently.

"I want to be positive he's the man who killed my folks. And you'll want to make certain he's responsible for the trouble

that's ruining the trail. Law and order have got to move out here, Dex! It's been slow in coming, and somebody's got to see it gets a start."

She was pleading now, and never had she been more beautiful, more womanly.

"Dad's outfit takes the trail at day-break," he told her slowly. "If Wyatt is planning anything, he'll leave Independence for a few days. Watch him Babs. I'll see you the moment I get back to town."

IV

THERE was a lot more Dex Ashley wanted to say, but he knew his time was up. The cold-eyed killer who had caught his attention the moment the man had slipped through the curtained doorway at the rear of the room had headed his way.

Death flamed in the little man's eyes and in the merciless cast of his pale face. It lurked in his smooth, tigerish walk, and in the hunched set of his slim shoulders. It rode his narrow hips in the form of the slick-handled six-shooters that his white hands brushed at each step he took.

"Get away from here!" Dex ordered Babs.

At the sharp urgency in his voice the girl stared at him wonderingly until she turned and saw the gunman advancing on them. Her eyes dilated with fear, and her face paled.

"Ace Ewalt!" she exclaimed. "Don't argue with him, Dex. He's the deadliest killer on Wyatt's payroll."

She moved aside as she spoke, and slid into the silence that again gripped the interior of the Wagon Wheel, for it was plain that Dex Ashley was going to face Ace Ewalt.

Ewalt stopped five paces distant from Dex who still sat in his chair.

"A smooth-tongued lady killer," the little man purred. "A pilgrim with more gall than nerve. Slipping in here and fooling with Conestoga Wyatt's girl while he's not around. I'm taking over his fight, mister. Get on your feet, and when you do, come up with that gun in your hand and let it do your talking for you!"

Beyond the little killer, Dex saw other men edging forward, hands sliding down to gun butts. Wyatt had laid a neat trap, Dex realized grimly. But Silver Dollar Mansfield was there, edging away from

the end of the bar, and the snout of his shotgun was poking out of his long coat.

In Dex's mind were several questions. Why was Wyatt trying so hard to put him out of the way? Was it because Dex might take the wagons through to Santa Fé? Was it because Wyatt feared he might lose Babs Sayers to an old love?

Ace Ewalt's slim body sagged into a half-crouch. A cruel smile quirked the corners of his thin mouth as the tips of his splayed fingers brushed gun butts.

"I'm waiting, mister," he prompted.

Dex's left hand rested on the table top before him. The other hand toyed with the glass of water that Babs had failed to drink. There wasn't one chance in a hundred that he could get to his gun before Ace Ewalt's bullets cut the life out of him. The little killer had every advantage, was fighting the only way he ever fought, Dex imagined, as he sought a way out of the trap.

No one saw Dex move until it was over. His right hand straightened and the glass of water flew into Ewalt's face. Cursing, the man tried to dodge, at the same time pulling his guns in the fastest, slap-leather draw Dex had ever seen.

The moment's respite was all Dex needed. He sent his chair crashing to the floor back of him as he lunged to his feet, and his pistol was in his right hand when Ewalt had blinked the water out of his eyes. Both men fired simultaneously. The thunderous concussion of the shots rocked the flimsy walls of the saloon, and Dex felt a bullet tug at his shirt under his left armpit.

One round black hole appeared on Ace Ewalt's white satin shirt over his heart. He stared blankly at Dex and swayed, dead on his feet, then crumpled forward on his face on the sawdust-covered floor.

Pandemonium broke loose in the crowded barroom. Someone cursed Dex with a mighty oath, and dance girls began screaming. Everybody tried to talk—everybody, except the men who moved forward through the milling throng, the men who now held their guns in their hands, hammers eared back, holding their fire until they could pour their lead into Dex's body without danger to the innocent bystanders ringing him, and the motionless body of Ace Ewalt.

"Hold it, you warthogs!"

MANSFIELD'S cold command sliced through the tumult with startling hardness. He was there back of them, and the sound of his shotgun hammers being eared back sounded distinctly in the dying noise. Wyatt's men stopped in their tracks.

"You've got ten seconds to put those guns back into leather," Mansfield told them. "Point out any man that fails to do so, Dex. I'll fill his back with buckshot."

Every gun slid back into its holster with alacrity. Each man stood there with hands in plain sight, mute testimony to their faith in the promise of Mansfield's assertion.

Unmolested, Dex and Mansfield slipped out the batwings into the darkness.

"That's just a starter," Mansfield muttered as they rode back to camp. "We'll see more of Wyatt before this trip is over. He's out for your scalp, and he won't stop until he collects it—or you collect his. . ."

Rawhide whips cracked in the faint dawn light, skinners swore at their straining mules, and the heavy wagons lurched forward to the familiar cry "Stretch out!" Dex Ashley's blood raced hotly within him in response to this vivid call to adventure and danger on the long trail ahead.

Fifteen wagons stretched out behind him, swaying and heaving over the rough ground. The low rumble of hoofs and wheels swelled loud in the morning hush, punctured by the pistol-like reports of the drivers' long whips.

Someone back along the line was strumming a banjo, and rough, loud voices took up the refrain. The last of the Ashley wagons were rolling—rolling toward Santa Fé hundreds of miles away, braving the menace of the dread *Jornado del Muerto*, defying the renegades that haunted the trail.

Staring beyond the stock guards who brought up the rear with the relief mules and a few saddle horses, Dex Ashley saw the slender form of his father limned against the campfire in the lot.

One slim arm went up in the air in farewell salute, and Dex waved his hat high over his own head in reply. Turning Ink-spot's head the other way, Dex took his place at the head of the caravan.

There would be no turning back. . . .

Ten days later they rolled into Council Grove at dusk, and Dex Ashley encountered part of the trouble prophesied for him by Silver Dollar Mansfield.

Cheerful campfires flickered over the creek bottom, and by their number revealed that many wagons were here awaiting more company, mute testimony of the fear that rode the trail. The Ashley camp was no sooner set up under the big oak and hickory trees than they had visitors.

Six men were in the group that approached the camp, and they walked into the circle of firelight confidently. They were all bearded men, dressed in buckskins, and heavily armed—all but one short, apish man who was clean-shaven and packed no gun. But a long-bladed knife gleamed dully at his belt and a wicked-looking long-handled hatchet hung at his hip.

"That's Squawman Ewalt," Mansfield breathed in Dex's ear as the men strode into the camp. "Ace Ewalt's brother. Uses a knife better'n Ace handled guns. I saw him stick a drunken Mexican through the middle back in Independence a month ago. We're in for trouble if he's heard about his brother."

Easing back into the shadows behind a nearby wagon, Mansfield was hidden from view, but Dex knew that the gambler's scattergun was trained on Squawman Ewalt's group as they stopped and looked expectantly about.

"Where's Conestoga Wyatt?" Ewalt asked brusquely, and his little shoe-button eyes swept the circle of wagons as though he owned them.

"Back in Independence, I reckon," Dex said drily.

SQUAWMAN EWALT started, and a sudden alertness shot over his ugly face.

"These wagons belong to Santa Fé—Southern, don't they?" he asked, looking at the white signs painted on the sides of the red and blue wagons. "Who's in charge of 'em?"

Dex grinned in Ewalt's face. "I am."

Those close-set eyes stared him up and down, and Dex was aware that he was facing a cool thinker. The impact of the man's mind was tangible and real.

"Old man Ashley's getting hard up," Ewalt observed, spurring a mouthful of tobacco juice into the flames. "You look mighty young to be pushing his wagons 'stead of Wyatt. How come?"

Irritated at the man's attitude, Dex

said sharply, "I'm Ashley's son. It's our own business how we run this freight line. Anything else you want to know?"

"Easy to dander up, ain't you?" Squawman Ewalt said. "I come to talk business with Wyatt. Since he ain't here, you'll do, youngster. They's fifty wagons camped in the grove. We was going to elect Wyatt wagon boss tomorrow and hit the trail for Santa Fé the next day. I got ten wagons here myself. Since Wyatt ain't making the trip, we'll elect us another wagon boss. Show up early in the morning and pick your man."

As the six men melted into the darkness that now enveloped the timber around the camp, Dex stared after them. And in him was a feeling of impending danger, a feeling that he could not put a finger on, yet knew was real.

Mansfield moved silently out of the shadows and fell in beside him. "We better pray that some wagon doesn't pull in here bringing news about Ace Ewalt," the gambler murmured. "Squawman thought a lot of his brother." He chuckled grimly. "So ten of his wagons join us on the trip. Squawman's never owned anything but an Indian wife and a tepee. He's on Conestoga Wyatt's payroll and so are those friends of his."

"How can he cause trouble?" Dex asked.

"Easiest way would be to get himself elected wagon boss tomorrow," Mansfield said, and the bright flames of the campfire reflected coldly in his dead eyes. "Nobody would be the wiser if he leads us into a trap."

Dex squared his shoulder. "The thing to do then is to warn the people here. I'll see everybody tonight."

He didn't miss the skeptical smile that flitted over Mansfield's face, but Silver Dollar said nothing more. Instead, he spread a blanket on the ground beside the fire and proceeded to clean and oil his guns. Supper was being prepared by one of the teamsters who served as cook.

"Better take a look at your gun, Dex," Mansfield advised. "You're liable to need it in a hurry."

Dex cleaned his Colt and the Spencer carbine he carried on his saddle. His thoughts were bitter as he worked. He had fought a war to wipe out prejudices

and hate and oppression, and out here in this wilderness he was fighting it again. An empire was at stake, and one man seemed intent on grabbing it.

That man, if Dex's suspicions were correct, was Conestoga Wyatt. And the proof of the man's treacherous activities might lay ahead somewhere on the trail.

V

WHEN Dex Ashley approached the big campfire in the clearing later that night, he saw a crowd gathered about a tapped whisky keg on a tree stump. Squawman Ewalt was passing out cups of the liquor.

"Look at them play up to Ewalt," Mansfield said. "He feeds them whisky and they'll vote him in as wagon boss in the morning. They're half-drunk now. No use trying to warn them about what's ahead, Dex. We're not even sure ourselves."

Mansfield was right, Dex knew. Bitterly he realized that only what might happen on the trail could prove his suspicions, and then it would be too late.

"I'm keeping my mouth shut," he said, but a decision was taking shape in his mind.

"Drink up, Ashley," Squawman Ewalt invited when he saw them. "Last chance at free liquor this side of Santa Fé."

The whisky was raw and potent. Dex made a wry face as he drank out of the tin cup that Ewalt handed him. Mansfield downed his liquor without a change in his deadpan expression.

A trader in a black broadcloth suit stared at Dex, and recognition gleamed in his eyes. Excitedly whispering in Ewalt's ear, the man was telling Ewalt about his brother's death, Dex knew, watching Ewalt's face lose its loose joviality and cloud into a hate-distorted mask. Ewalt's hand closed about the handle of the knife in his belt as he turned on Dex.

"So you killed Ace!" he whispered hoarsely, and the group of men about them grew quiet. "You had to gulch him, Ashley!" he said, edging his squat body forward. "Nobody could down Ace in a fair fight. I'm claiming revenge—now!"

Ewalt closed in on Dex with amazing speed. The blade of his knife sparkled with a crimson fire glow as his long right

arm swung in a huge arc. Fast footwork moved Dex to one side. The keen blade that had been aimed at his heart sliced open his shirt, bringing blood along his arm muscle where it touched his already bruised flesh.

Anger burning at white heat within him at Ewalt's attack, Dex dove into the man before Ewalt could regain his balance. Chopping down at the knife hand with the heel of his own right hand, Dex felt bone and muscle grind under the blow.

Ewalt grunted in pain, and his knife dropped to the ground. Giving him no chance to recover, Dex pounded him in the face and body with short hammerlike blows that left him spitting blood and trying to cover up. Ewalt was no fighter with his fists, and he wasted no time reaching for that hatchet that hung at his hip.

Digging his boots firmly into the ground, Dex put his entire weight behind a looping uppercut to Ewalt's jaw. He felt the man's face go pulpy as bones broke under his own iron-hard fist. Ewalt swayed like a bullet-creased buffalo bull, then slid to the ground, bloody face turned up to the bright moon high in the velvet sky overhead.

Dex turned to the crowd who stood by gaping.

"Anybody like to take up this fight?" he asked softly.

No one said a word. Behind him he saw Mansfield and the lack of answer to his challenge, for Mansfield's scatter gun menaced the crowd.

"We'd better get away from here," Mansfield suggested.

On the way back to their own camp, Dex told his friend of the decision he had made before the fight.

"We're pulling out of here in the morning. Our wagons can travel faster alone and we'll pick our own trail. Ewalt will cause trouble if we stay with the train."

"He'll cause us trouble if we leave it," Mansfield said bluntly. "He'll keep Conestoga Wyatt posted on what we do. These boys are in this too deep to slip now. Either way it's a gamble whether we reach Santa Fé with the wagons. I'm game to try it alone, Dex, but there are your men to consider. You'd better find out what they want to do."

THEY found the Santa Fé-Southern Freight teamsters gathered by the fire. Several of the men had witnessed the fight, and a new respect for the man who had taken on Squawman Ewalt and his knife bare-handed shone in their eyes as they stared at their boss. When he told them what he wanted to do and asked them if they were willing to attempt the trip, they readily answered him.

"We'd rather stay here than skin our mules under Ewalt," Rufe Vidam, a Missourian and head teamster on the trip, drawled distastefully. "You say the word, and we'll drive our wagons anywhere for you. Ain't that so, boys?"

Their hearty chorus backed Rufe Vidam's words.

"Better turn in and get some sleep," Dex suggested. "We roll in the morning."

It was long before the first faint streaks of dawn that morning when Dex heard a soft noise. The log fire had long since guttered out, and Dex had pulled a blanket over him to cut the chill. He had lain there sleepless, thinking about the Ewalt brothers and Conestoga Wyatt, and listening to the distant noise of the celebrating crowd. Babs Sayers had been in his thoughts, too, and Dex was making plans that included the girl for when he got back from this trip.

Since pleasant thoughts lasted longest, he was picturing Babs' vivid beauty in his mind when the popping of a twig sounded faint in the morning hush, bringing him up on one elbow, nervous and edgy as a cat.

A dark shape loomed over him, and moonlight glinted on the knife in the man's hand—a hand that was raised high over the man's head, that swept downward as Dex realized his danger.

Twisting desperately to one side, he flung the blanket at his assailant in time to foul the knife in its folds. Cursing, the man shook loose. By that time Dex had slipped his gun out of the holster on the ground beside him where he had laid it before going to bed.

As he whipped the pistol up to firing position, the crimson blast of Silver Dollar Mansfield's scatter gun drummed at Dex's ears, and the charge of buckshot seared its path by his ear. The would-be murderer bent at the waist, both hands wrapped about his stomach, his gasping

breaths sounding loud. Then he groaned softly and collapsed on the ground at their feet.

"I gave him both barrels," Mansfield said. "I hope it's Ewalt."

Dex's crew gathered around the body. Someone brought out flint and steel and coaxed the fire into life. As the flickering light played over the bearded face of the dead man, Mansfield swore disappointedly.

"That's one of Ewalt's men," he said. "He was here with Ewalt earlier this evening."

"Light some lanterns," Dex ordered. "A couple of you carry what's left of *that*. A couple more get guns and come along while we pay Squawman Ewalt another visit."

They found the liquored crowd still celebrating. Ewalt was among them. He stiffened at their approach, and a grayness stole over his gashed and swollen face at sight of the burden they packed. Once more an expectant hush fell over the clearing as these men who faced death every day on the trail sensed its presence now.

"Here's your man, Ewalt," Dex said. Standing there before the man, legs spread wide apart, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, his hands were within easy reach of his gun. "I'm sorry it wasn't you who jumped me. You can tell Conestoga Wyatt that nothing is stopping the Ashley wagons this trip."

A STARTLED look flashed over Ewalt's face at mention of Wyatt's name, and Dex knew his random thrust had gone home.

Ewalt remained silent, though the murderous look that twisted his beaten face was eloquent enough.

The limp body of the dead man was dropped on the ground at Ewalt's feet. Callously the squawman stared at his late companion, then shifted his gaze to Dex's little group, mentally weighing his chances in a fight with them.

"Conestoga Wyatt?" Ewalt shook his shaggy head. "Don't know what you're talking about. He's got nothing to do with me or my wagons. I don't know why Pete here jumped you, either. I'm going to cut your heart out of you with my knife the first chance I get, but nobody

has to do it for me. What's your game, Ashley? You trying to pin something on me?"

"Just putting you straight, friend," Dex said grimly. "There'll be no more warnings."

Ewalt shrugged his bearlike shoulders and said nothing, yet Dex left the clearing knowing that he had come out second best in the argument.

The Ashley wagons slipped out of Council Grove the next day, watched by many men, but their drivers spoken to by none. Word had been passed around that Dex Ashley was a trouble-maker, and he was avoided as if he had the plague. There were many who doubted his wisdom in leaving the big caravan and their uncertainty showed in the vague shaking of grizzled heads and muttered talk.

Others were openly jubilant at the departure, and Squawman Ewalt was one of these. A cunning smile bent his mashed lips as he called one of his men aside and whispered instructions in his ear. A few minutes later that man saddled a big claybank gelding and rode out of the grove at a fast pace.

He rode in the direction taken by the Ashley wagons, but he carefully kept out of sight of them.

The Santa Fé-Southern Freight wagon train found Mud Creek in a low flood stage and half a day was lost in crossing it. The steep banks of Cottonwood Creek proved worse. Every wagon would have been lost but for the trail savvy of Rufe Vidam. Following his advice, they hitched a mule team to the rear of each wagon to keep it from plunging over the steep banks.

Trouble rode with Dex Ashley's wagons, and he could not do anything at all about it.

For once, every whim of fate on the trail seemed to be against the Santa Fé-Southern. If a large stone lay on the trail, at least one of the wagon wheels ran into it, and spokes were cracked. Horses had trouble with prairie dog holes that sprinkled the route.

Deep washes had cut across the trail and had to be skirted. Snakes spooked the teams. Harness broke and had to be spliced.

These were minor things, but they were a nuisance. It was a question when luck would change—if ever.

VI

AS THE miles rolled behind them, the country changed. Elms, cottonwoods, and willows appeared. They left the tall grass behind and rolled over short buffalo grass that hugged the ground. Wild plums were plentiful and, to Dex's appreciative eyes, the change was good to see.

The Little Arkansas was the worst stream of all to negotiate. One by one the wagons drew up at its almost vertical banks one afternoon, six days out of Council Grove, and the drivers joined Dex and Mansfield where they sat on their horses.

"You aiming to get these wagons across here?" a teamster making his first trip over the trail asked, peering right and left along the willow-fringed banks. "You'll have trouble enough just riding that black horse to yonder bank."

"I don't know," Dex said honestly. He turned to Rufe Vidam. "Got any answers?"

Vidam nodded, his lean, whiskery face stolid.

"Yep. That's why we brought along picks and shovels. We're going to dig our way down, mister. Them that ain't digging can take axes and cut willows to lay across the river bottom. That water ain't deep, but there's plenty of mud under it. Once past the Little Arkansas, we won't be digging out all the time."

Everybody fell to with a will, but their troubles had just begun. As they worked and sweated, the air became filled with tiny black insects that settled over man and beast alike. Their bites raised great welts on their victims, almost driving them mad with pain.

"Damn buffalo gnats!" Rufe Vidam exclaimed, slapping at his bare face and hands. "Might's well get used to 'em, though. They'll stay with us a long time."

Lulled by the peacefulness of the past six days on the trail, Dex put every man to work instead of posting guards about the wagons as he had done at every stop prior to this one. A crude trail was cut down the near bank just before dusk, and a makeshift willow bridge was laid across the shallow river bed.

The cook was preparing a meal up on the bank by the wagons, and the smell of black coffee and frying meat was wafted down to the laboring men on a slight

breeze. The cook began pounding on a wheel with a hammer, and the hungry crew scrambled up the bank to their supper.

They were squatting on their heels in a loose circle about the campfire, eating their meal out of tin plates, when the ripple of gunfire stirred the deepening dusk. It was followed by the thin hum of shafted arrows, and the wild whoops of attacking Indians.

The charge was led by a huge chieftain whose mighty body was clad only in a breech clout, cartridge belts and holsters, and who carried a smoking, flaming pistol in each hand. He leaped forward on foot, as did his screaming, savage warriors. His face was a painted, scowling devil's mask—and his broad chest was covered with red hair!

Ignoring the wagon crew, this Indian chief battled his way toward Dex and Mansfield who had holed up under a wagon.

"Pawnees!" Mansfield grunted, taking in the situation with his dead eyes. "We're licked, Dex! Not a chance in the world to fight them with the wagons scattered this way!"

His shotgun was empty, but the hide-out gun in his hands bucked and flamed as he triggered rapidly.

Dex emptied his own pistol at the darting forms that circled them, then quickly reloaded the weapon, thankful that he and Mansfield had not turned their horses loose to graze with the stock herd. There was still a chance they might escape on them.

The stench of acrid powdersmoke filled his nostrils, and the shrieks of fighting, dying men mingled with savage Pawnee war cries. Dex saw his men go down one by one, and cold fury glowed in his pale eyes, yet he did not allow it to sap his reason.

"We're the only ones left!" he cried at Mansfield as his gun hammer snapped on empty cartridges again.

YELLING and scalping, the flitting Indians swarmed over the camp as resistance ceased. The huge Pawnee chief was closing in.

"Grab horses and ride!" yelled Dex.

Their trained army mounts had not spooked, and the two men hit leather

fast. The lead of many guns searched for their flesh, and the hum of streaking arrows was in their ears. Maybe it was the darkness, though it could have been the boldness of their flight, but it worked. There was only one way to go, and they sent their horses sliding down the fresh cut in the river bank without hesitation.

The moon was rising above the rim of the prairie, but it was still dark along the water. Splashing, hopping, stumbling, they urged their horses across the willow bridge to the opposite bank, while lead whistled erratically around them. The raiders were firing blindly, hoping to cut them down.

Raging yells followed them until they pulled up behind an outcropping of the river bank a few hundred yards upstream.

"What a sight!" Dex groaned bitterly.

"Yeah," Mansfield muttered as he toppled off his mount and sprawled limply on the sandy river ledge.

As Dex slid out of his own saddle, he had the feeling that Silver Dollar Mansfield was dead!

Pursuit by the savages, Dex knew, would be swift and relentless as soon as they brought up their own ponies. He had a few minutes in which to escape, yet Dex Ashley's first thought was of his friend. His memory raced back to their Army days, and the innumerable times they had fought shoulder to shoulder, giving no quarter and asking none. Lieutenant Mansfield had been that kind of officer.

They had lost track of each other upon being mustered out of the Army until Mansfield had entered Dex's life again when he had come to his rescue in Dex's fight with Conestoga Wyatt at Independence. Mansfield had stuck by Dex ever since, abandoning whatever private plans he might have had, saying little, yet giving of his friendship in his every act.

Now Mansfield was dead or seriously wounded. Dex had no time to determine which. Unbuttoning Mansfield's vest, he felt the sticky blood oozing out of the bullet-hole in the man's chest. Tearing off pieces of Mansfield's shirt, he made pads and tied them on chest and back where the bullet had passed through.

Exultant war whoops sounded downstream. The Pawnees had descended into

the river bottom! Their expert trailers would find him in a few minutes. Lifting Mansfield's limp body across Inksport was a chore that left Dex dripping with sweat. Climbing into the saddle, he shifted Mansfield across his knees where he could hold him, then, leading Mansfield's horse behind him, Dex took to the shallow water. Riding upstream, he looked for a break in the steep banks that would enable him to reach the plains above.

He hadn't found it when he heard the pursuit splashing behind him. There were several crumbling slides that his big Morgan could have taken normally, but Dex dared not attempt the climb burdened with Mansfield's weight. Hoping that the darkness still hid him, he left the water and turned into a stand of willows that hugged the wall to his left.

There he dismounted and laid Mansfield on the ground.

The scatter gun still hung in its harness about Mansfield's waist. It was a moment's work to find shells and load the twin barrels. Mansfield's empty shoulder guns were in their holsters, and Dex loaded them, too. He jacked the empties out of his own pistol and refilled its chambers. Pulling his Spencer carbine out of saddle boot, Dex laid his little arsenal before him and prepared to make his last stand.

DEX made out six Pawnees in the pursuit party. They rode fast in the lifting darkness of the rising moon, confident that their prey was penned in by the steep walls and could not escape them.

As they raced up abreast of his hiding place, Dex dragged in his breath. Trickles of sweat ran down his back under his shirt.

Discovery meant death!

His breath gusted out of him as they swept past, failing to see the wet hoof-prints that cut aside in the river bank. But with relief came the knowledge that they would be back like maddened bloodhounds when they discovered their prey was somewhere behind them.

Stowing Mansfield's guns in his saddlebags, Dex turned his attention to his friend. Placing his hand under the bloody shirt, he felt the faint heartbeat. After another struggle, Dex tied the unconscious Mansfield across the wounded man's horse with a piece of rope from his own saddle.

Mounting Inkspot, he rode downstream, leading Mansfield's horse, alert for possible Pawnees who might be tailing the others.

He put Inkspot to the first slide he came to, emerging on the level ground on the far side of the river without an alarm being raised. Keeping well-hidden behind the willows that screened the river bank, he rode downstream. To do otherwise seemed foolish. The Pawnees would expect him to flee northward. If he fooled them by riding to the south, he might escape.

Opposite his raided camp, Dex stopped and stared. Instead of the gutted, burning remains he expected to see, the wagons were in motion. Mule teams were hitched to them and drivers were popping whips. In orderly procession the wagons were wheeling about and rolling back in the general direction of Council Grove. The distance was too great and the flickering light cast by the fire too dim for Dex to see more. But it was enough.

"The raiders of the *Jornado*," he said softly. "No wonder they chased us. They can't afford to let anybody escape."

He gave one more burning, hate-filled look before riding on. Indians had been in that raid, but white men had directed it and taken part in it. That huge Pawnee chief could have been Conestoga Wyatt himself. If so, the raiders would scour this country relentlessly in search of him, Dex Ashley.

So, with his bitter thoughts and his unconscious companion and his knowledge that death haunted his backtrail, Dex Ashley rode hard and far that night. And when daylight came, he knew he had shaken off pursuit.

With daylight and security came his fear that Silver Dollar was dying. The man was still unconscious, and his bloodless face looked like a waxen mask. If he breathed, it was undetectable, but the faint beat of his heart proved that he had survived that wild ride.

Indecision pulled at Dex with icy fingers. Mansfield had to have medical care at once, and that was out of the question. If he didn't receive attention, he would die. Bathing Mansfield's feverish face with water from his canteen, Dex hunkered on the ground beside the unconscious gambler and pondered what to do.

The loud, nerve-racking noise of dry axle shafts rubbing against wood brought him up alert, carbine on the level, to see a Mexican driving a little cart that rolled on two huge, solid wooden wheels and was pulled by one huge ox. The Mexican was old and fat, and was dressed in the buckskins of a hunting man.

As he pulled the cart to a stop in the middle of the sandy wash, Dex saw that his old eyes twinkled at sight of human companionship. They clouded at sight of the prone figure of Mansfield.

"Good day, señor," the old man said in hesitant English. "Your comrade, he is dead?"

Shaking his head, Dex explained Mansfield's need of a doctor.

"My Juanita," the old man proudly said, "is the best nurse in this wilderness. Put your friend in my cart, señor, and we will take him to my home. He shall have the best of care."

VII

FOR a week Silver Dollar Mansfield lay in José Ortega's adobe hut, lingering on the brink of the long sleep, and watched night and day by the Mexican couple. Dex Ashley, who watched over him, too, was aroused from a doze late one night by José and Juanita.

"Your friend will live," they told him, and it took a long time for the meaning of the words to penetrate his weary brain.

Rolling over on the dirt floor, Dex fell asleep and slept the clock around, covered by a warm buffalo robe that Juanita Ortega placed over him.

In the three weeks that elapsed before Mansfield was able to ride again, Dex scouted the country for sign of the raiders who had stolen his wagons, but he was far south of the regular Little Arkansas crossing and safe from further pursuit. José Ortega's little hut was hidden on the willow-covered bank of a stream that fed into the river, and the Mexican couple seldom saw any human beings, except roving bands of Indians.

On these lonely rides, Dex Ashley took along his bitter thoughts and memories. He thought of Dex Senior, and the sleepless nights his father must be enduring while awaiting word of his wagons—word that meant ruin.

He thought of Babs, risking her life by working at Wyatt's headquarters, trying to solve the mystery that brought death and destruction to the wagon trails. Bit-terest of all was the thought of those brave teamsters led by Rufe Vidam who had given Dex their loyalty and had lost their lives by doing so. They would be avenged, he vowed.

Again and again he went over his first encounter with Conestoga Wyatt, seeking to find some justification for the man's hatred of him. Putting himself in Wyatt's position he outlined the man's moves as kingpin behind the raids that scourged the trails. It all added up, and each time Dex went over it he became more convinced that Wyatt's was the sinister guiding hand behind all the trouble.

With his conviction came a black and bitter hatred for Wyatt, and a determination to settle his bloody score with the man when he got back to Independence.

Dex and Silver Dollar said their sincere good-bys to the Ortegas one morning, and tried to press gold coins into their hands, but the old couple refused the money.

"Your friendship, señores, is all we want," José said, and there was a pride in his voice that stopped their protests and sent them on their way.

Five days later they sighted smoke along the Missouri River and knew that Independence was near.

"No use letting Wyatt know we're alive and looking for him," Mansfield said, and his sunken eyes were blazing.

There wasn't much meat left on his thin body, but he had donned his black clothing again, and his hideout guns were in their holsters and his scatter gun was at his hip.

"No use letting anybody know we're here," Dex decided as they rode into view of the town's scattered edges. "They'll find out soon enough." His voice hardened. "First thing I want to do is get a look at the new wagons in Wyatt's store."

"Yeah," Mansfield agreed, as he examined his guns. This time Dex needed no reminder to inspect his own weapons.

Wyatt's Missouri Outfitters was a huge combination affair that sprawled over an entire lot. Located at the upper end of Main Street, the store front opened on the road. A blacksmith shop occupied a cor-

ner back of the store, and the canvas-topped wagons were lined up in neat rows at the other end. Large stock corrals were located farther out of town along the river.

The noonday sun beamed down hot and bright, for summer was upon the prairies. The dust and fatigue of their five-day journey rode Dex and Mansfield and their horses heavily as they dismounted in the open space back of the store and tied their mounts at the hitch-rack there.

TWO big-muscled smiths, naked to the waist, were working at their forges. A pair of heavily armed men, sitting in the shade of a wagon shed, idly watched Dex and Mansfield, seeing two bearded, travel-stained pilgrims who stamped saddle-worn feet on the hot ground and slapped dust from their clothing with their wide-brimmed hats.

"That jasper in the fancy suit looks like Silver Dollar Mansfield," the small loafer remarked. "I'd swear 'twas him if we didn't think the Pawnees lifted his top-knot on the trail."

"Looks like—hey!" his big comrade choked, jumping to his feet. "That is Silver Dollar Mansfield! And that's old man Ashley's hellion with him!"

Dex and Mansfield strode toward the wagons.

"What's them hombres going to do?" the small man asked.

His companion was more far-seeing.

"One thing they ain't going to do is look at them wagons. Take word to Wyatt fast as you can. I'll stop 'em."

The two men left the shed, the messenger breaking into a stumbling trot as he hastened through the back door of the store, the big man loosening his twin guns in their oiled holsters before intercepting his prey.

"You gents want to buy a wagon?" he asked as he came up to them.

Dex detected the tenseness behind the words. And he had not failed to note the startled recognition on the faces of Wyatt's men and their hurried talk before they swung into action.

Dex was in no mood for pretense. "No," he said shortly. "We're looking, not buying."

"Take your time, pardner," Wyatt's man said.

Walking over to the blacksmith shop, Dex picked up a heavy hammer and chisel from a work-bench. The two smithies watched him, sensing that something was wrong. Dex saw the protruding butts of six-shooters under their leather aprons.

At the first freshly painted wagon, he placed the chisel against the wheel hub and raised the hammer to knock the iron band loose.

"I wouldn't do that, mister," the big gunman warned.

The menace in his words was unmistakable. Dex looked around.

The man had fallen into a half-crouch and his eyes blazed with an eager light as his hands hovered over his pouched guns. Beyond him the two smithies were hurrying to back him up. They had discarded their cumbersome aprons, their guns were within easy reach of their hands, and their determination to use them showed in their grim faces.

Silver Dollar Mansfield faced them alone. His dead eyes had come alive with a frosty glow, and his right hand was hidden under his coat, fingers curled about his scatter gun.

"Tear that wheel apart," Mansfield said. "Maybe there's a reason this gent don't want us to look at it, Dex."

Before Dex had time to drop the tools, the gunman's hands sped to his guns. Those guns bucked and smoked in his hands, their sharp bark swallowed in the booming roar of Mansfield's scatter gun. The heavy concussion split the midday hush over Independence wide open.

Like a pulpy tomato smashed by a rock, the gunman's face turned crimson, his features obliterated by the buckshot. He teetered on booted feet, then slid to the dust underfoot.

Mansfield's thin lips twisted in a grimace as he turned on the two smithies. They had their guns in their hands and were triggering. One of them groaned and plunged face-down in the dirt, a gaping hole torn in his chest. Dex flung up his pistol, and his first bullet dropped the other man.

"Better take a look at that wheel," Mansfield urged before the gunshot echoes had died away.

WHEN the hub band was pounded off, they stared at the crude cross inside

it—the mark Dex had put on each wagon in his train before starting on that trip to Santa Fé over a month ago!

"Reckon it's no surprise," Mansfield said, and Dex shook his head.

Now that the mystery of the *Jornado del Muerto* was no more, a heavy weariness because of all this plundering and killing lay within him. And the men responsible for it all were still alive and dangerous.

"Wyatt's probably at the Wagon Wheel," Dex said. "We'll take him there." He was reloading his pistol and moving out the back end of the lot with the words:

"Look sharp," Mansfield warned. "Don't forget he knows about us."

As Dex Ashley and Silver Dollar Mansfield edged between Wyatt's store and the barber shop beside it and came out into Main Street, they found the board walks deserted. A few horses lined the hitch-racks, especially in front of the Wagon Wheel three blocks down the street, but not a man or woman was in sight. The people of Independence sensed that Death patrolled their town that day, and they wanted no part of it.

"Makes me feel important," Mansfield said drily. "Me and you sending this town to cover. It's never happened before."

"Maybe the town will get the last laugh," Dex commented. "Prying Wyatt out of his place will be some job. I'm wondering—"

He broke off as a girl came hurrying through the Wagon Wheel's batwing doors. Even at a distance, Babs Sayers' figure was easily recognizable. Stopping under the overhang that put her in partial shadow, she looked uncertainly down the street, then saw Dex and Mansfield two blocks up the road.

Gathering her long skirt in one hand, she ran toward them, and Dex admired the ease which she covered the distance. Still, back in the old days, he had never been able to outrun her.

"Dex!" she cried, stopping before him, her chest rising and falling rapidly with her breathing. "We thought you were dead! So did Wyatt until one of his men came running into the saloon a few minutes ago and told him you were alive. I've never seen Wyatt so scared. He turned white, Dex! He knows you're looking for him. People stampeded out of the

saloon like cattle."

She looked at Dex, and worry made her blue eyes darker.

"Wyatt told me to find you, Dex," she hurried on. "He said to tell you that he was waiting, that Independence was too small for both of you. One of you must die!" She hesitated an instant, then said, "I gave his ring back to him before I left."

She moved up close to Dex. He smelled the fragrance of her perfume again, and realized what he would lose if he died in front of Wyatt's guns. Abruptly he put an end to those thoughts.

"How many men with Wyatt?" he asked.

"Five or six," Babs answered nervously.

"Is there any way of getting into the Wagon Wheel that Wyatt won't be watching?"

"There are two doors downstairs. He has men at both of them."

"What about the upper story?" Dex asked. "Don't you live up there somewhere?"

"Yes," Babs whispered. "With another girl. All the windows are kept locked, but I opened the one in our room. If there was some way to climb in—"

"I'll find a way," Dex told her. "Run and tell Dad what's happening. He wouldn't miss this fight for the world. And, Babs, put this on your finger again."

Taking the cord from about his neck, he took his mother's wedding ring off and slipped it on the girl's finger.

HE FELT the clutch of her soft hand on his arm and the light brush of her warm lips against his as he stooped toward her. A sound that was half a sob came from her as she sped back down the street toward the freight office across from the Wagon Wheel.

"There's a false front on the eating place that sides the saloon," Mansfield said. "Reckon it won't be much trouble to climb up on it, then crawl through that window into the Wagon Wheel. That's my job. When I get their attention, you come in the front door, Dex."

"Like fun you will!" Dex bit out, but his heart warmed at the knowledge that Mansfield wanted to take the greater risk. "I thought of it first."

"All right," Mansfield said. He realized the futility of arguing with Dex.

"When you stir them up, I'll join you. Good luck, Dex!"

Dex hesitated for a moment, his face thoughtful. He glanced in the direction that Babs had gone, and he frowned.

"If anything happens to me," Dex said, "I want you to see that Wyatt never gets her. Will you promise?"

Mansfield nodded solemnly.

"If it means my own life, Dex."

"Then I don't mind the job ahead," Dex said, holding out his hand.

One quick handclasp and Dex vanished around to the alley paralleling the street.

VIII

QUIETLY as an Indian, Dex Ashley worked his way to the Wagon Wheel and the one-story eating place beside it. From there he crawled up an old wagon tongue onto the eating house roof.

He lay there, sprawled flat on his stomach, gun in hand, studying the windows above him. The unlocked window was easy to spot since Babs had pushed it open a few inches. Satisfied that no one inside the saloon had seen him, he pulled the long wagon tongue onto the roof with him and set its end against the window casing.

Easing his way up the shaft, he clambered through the open window. Sensing movement along the wall to the right of him, he whirled, hand streaking to the holstered gun.

He saw a frightened girl hugging the wall. As his swift glance took in the room, he knew from the description Babs had given him that he was in her bedroom.

"Don't make any noise," he warned the girl by the wall, and he slipped into the hall before he thought of the absurdity of his cautioning.

But the girl didn't raise an alarm—not until he was outside the room. Then she began screaming at the top of her lungs.

The hall was short, ending in a staircase that wound down to the main floor below. Mansfield had told Dex all about it, and Dex was glad of the knowledge now, for that girl's shouting would bring a fast investigation.

Pulling his gun, he plunged down the stairs.

Conestoga Wyatt had stationed his five men so they covered both front and rear

doors of the Wagon Wheel. He was swearing lustily as he heard the screaming upstairs.

"Run up and see what's bothering that wench," he ordered Squawman Ewalt. "Shut her up!"

Silent in his Pawnee moccasins, Ewalt padded through the curtained exit at the rear of the barroom. Besides the long-handled hatchet at his belt, he also carried a sixgun, and the bright blade of his knife gleamed in his right hand. As he heard Dex Ashley's reckless descent of the stairs, gliding noiselessly up to the first turn, he flattened his squat body against the wall, knife poised for instant use.

Maybe it was instinct, maybe it was movement on the part of the too eager Ewalt, but Dex Ashley knew he had run into a trap as he came down upon the small landing. Twisting like a cat in the air, he let his body hit the wall before him, his back to it, and he crouched there, gun in hand, facing Ewalt.

In this small space the quarrel between Dex Ashley and Squawman Ewalt was settled. Dex's back had no more than touched the wall before Ewalt's knife sped at his heart. Jerking his hatchet from his belt, the squawman leaped forward, intent on bashing out his enemy's brains. But it was only to halt in his tracks, drawn upright as a hunting lance, a look of bewilderment replacing the hatred on his ugly face as Dex triggered his gun twice, sending two bullets through Ewalt's chest.

Ewalt's knife had come close to its mark, for the heavy haft quivered over the slim blade embedded in the wall back of Dex. That blade had passed under his armpit, taking part of his shirt with it.

As Ewalt crashed to the landing, Dex stooped and plucked the dead man's gun from his belt. Below him he could hear running footsteps and shouts as someone came to investigate. His reckless tactics had brought him this far, Dex thought grimly, so why not stretch his luck some more? Drumming in his mind was the knowledge of what must have happened to the hapless wagon train that had placed confidence in Squawman Ewalt back at Council Grove that night a few weeks ago. That score, at least, was evened.

Pounding on down the steps, he met

the little gunman who a few minutes before had rushed from the wagon lot to warn Wyatt of his danger. With the caution of a fearful man, the fellow came through the exit with a gun in each hand. Dax's right-hand gun spoke first. The little gunman triggered blindly into the floor as he plunged down.

LEAPING over the sprawled body, Dex swept aside the curtains and burst into the barroom. Wyatt's huge figure loomed behind the bar. His men were crouched behind upturned tables, covering the bathing doors. Wyatt saw Dex and rasped a string of oaths.

Mansfield's tall figure, lean as a buggy whip, whipped through the batwings, followed like an elusive shadow by Dex Senior, carrying a big buffalo gun. They dodged into the shadows to either side of the door.

The rest of that thundering, smoke-filled scene was never clear to Dex Ashley. Firing at Wyatt and his men, Dex flung himself behind the pot-bellied stove beside the exit. As he emptied his guns, his ears throbbed to the roar of Mansfield's scatter gun and the deeper roar of the Sharpes in his father's hands. As the guns in the hands of Wyatt's men answered, Dex was thinking that he had never fought a battle in the war that equalled this.

Wyatt's gun snapped on empty shells. As Dex flung himself over the bar at the man, the battle was abruptly ended. Wyatt's three men were dead or wounded. Mansfield stood at the end of the bar, wiping blood off his gashed face with his handkerchief. Dex Senior staggered to a chair and sat down, nursing a bullet-shattered arm.

As young Dex landed on the surprised Wyatt, the breath went out of Wyatt in a great whoosh when both men fell to the sawdust floor. Dex slugged blindly at the big man's face, and all the fury within him was put into those solid, meaty blows that crushed flesh and bone. Garbled words came out of Wyatt's smashed mouth as his bearlike arms wrapped around Dex's middle like a vise and tightened with bone-breaking pressure.

Growling with animal-like fury, Wyatt tightened his hug. Dex bit down on his lip to stop the agonized yell that bubbled

there. His ribs would be smashed like toothpicks in another second or two. Frantically he brought his knee up into Wyatt's stomach, feeling a momentary pleasure at the deed as he remembered that Wyatt had fought him the same way in their first fight.

The pressure of those great arms relaxed, and Dex wriggled out of Wyatt's embrace. This time his solid, clubbing blows sank into Wyatt's face with more effect. The man went limp, all the fight beaten out of that great body.

He was still conscious, glaring at Dex with fury in his yellow eyes. Tearing open the man's buckskin shirt, Dex stared at the mass of flaming red hair that matted Wyatt's chest.

"There's our Pawnee chief," he told Mansfield, who stood over them.

Mansfield nodded. "I better shoot him," he said, placing the scatter gun muzzle against the red-haired chest.

"No!" Dex objected, sickened at all this bloodshed. "We have no legal proof of his guilt. We'll let him go. His punishment will follow him wherever he goes, once our story is told."

Assisting Wyatt to his feet, Dex and Mansfield propelled him through the batwings. The giant lurched to the hitch-rack and climbed into the saddle of one of the horses tethered there. He sat looking at them, a hatred in his face.

He turned his horse away, twisted in

the saddle, and Dex saw that he had a gun in his hand. Treacherous to the last, Wyatt staked his life on the hideout weapon he carried hidden on his saddle.

Dex and Mansfield fired together, Wyatt's gun dropped out of his hand as he toppled out of saddle, and his skittish horse trotted away. . . .

IT WAS much later, after one of Wyatt's men, who had not died, had revealed Wyatt's grand plan to steal himself an empire, that Dex, Mansfield, Dex Senior and Babs sat in Wyatt's office before his open safe with its contents spread out before them.

"There's a fortune here," Dex Senior said, counting the stacks of gold specie on the table. "Enough to pay back my losses and settle any claims that might be brought against Wyatt's estate. We'll start over again, Dex. We'll make the Santa Fé-Southern Freight the largest outfit the West has ever known."

"On one condition," Dex said. "You'll run this end, Dad. Silver Dollar will boss the wagons. I'm aiming to settle down on the other end in Santa Fé." He turned to speak to the girl at his side. "It'll be lonesome there, Babs."

"Not too lonesome, Dex," she said, and the promise in her shining eyes was enough for Dex Ashley. He pulled her close, and as he kissed her soft lips he knew that his troubles were over.

NEVADA'S TREASURE CACHE

ONE of the most remarkable silver pockets in the history of the world was uncovered in the late 1860s in the Eberhardt Mine, located on the high, windswept shoulder of Treasure Hill in central Nevada. Worked as an open-cut "glory hole", this queen of the bonanzas produced more than \$3,000,000 worth of silver ore from an excavation 70 feet long, 40 feet wide, and nowhere more than 28 feet deep.

The fantastic strike at the Eberhardt was not made until several years after the original strike on Treasure Hill, which had precipitated the mining boom camps of Treasure City, Shermantown, and Hamilton, now all ghost towns. The first stampede to these mushrooming towns found building materials practically non-existent. With winter blizzards howling across the mountains it was necessary that shelters be thrown together from anything

which came to hand.

The story is told of two men who arrived at the scene of the rush and hurriedly erected a cabin as protection against the icy gale. By the time warmer weather arrived, their funds were exhausted and their winter-long search over Treasure Hill had yielded them nothing but disappointment and sore feet. About this time a new strike was claiming men's attention, and the pair abandoned their Treasure City cabin and set out for the new diggings.

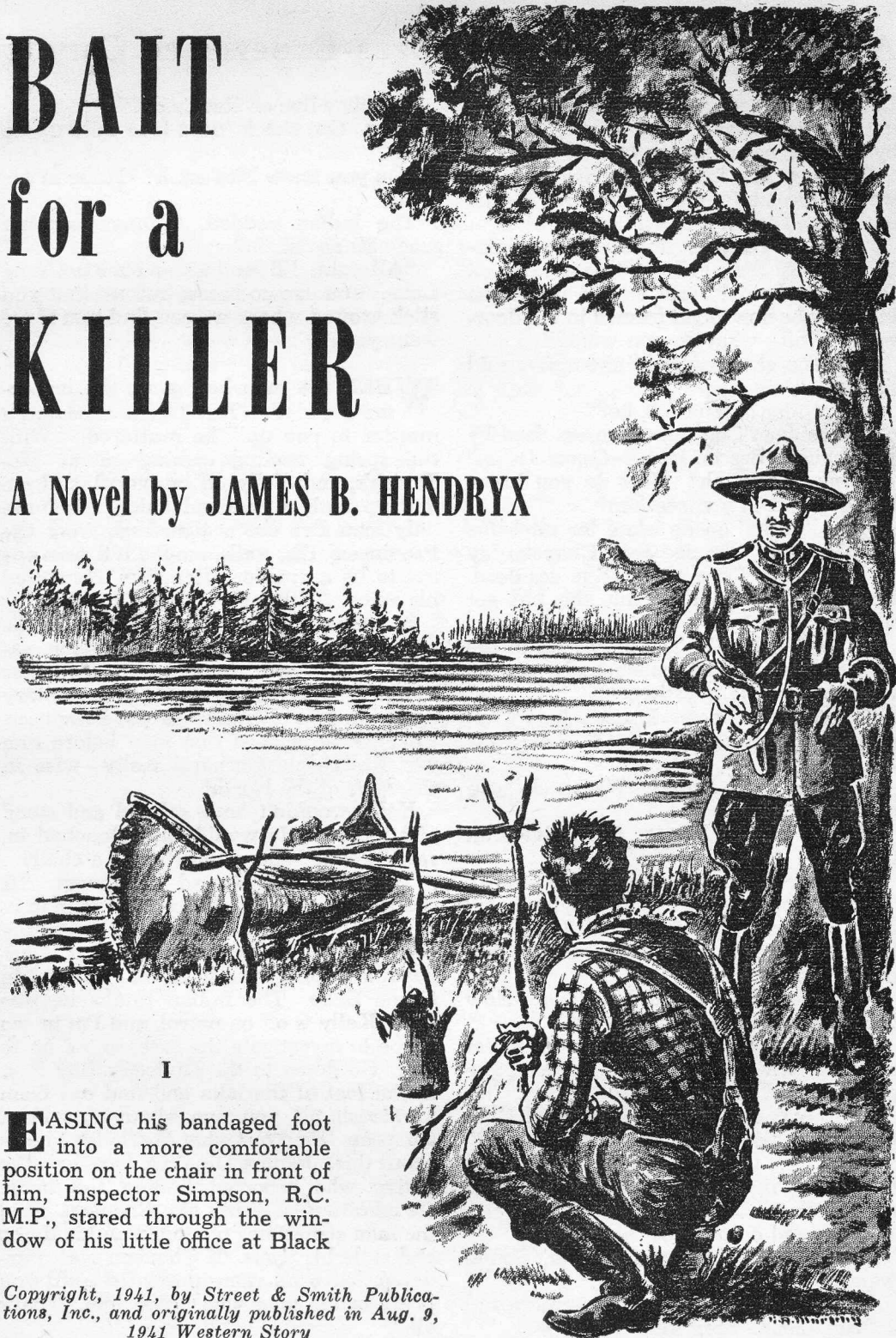
As soon as they were safely gone, one of their camp neighbors filed claim on their abandoned cabin, which he had been covertly eyeing with interest. Dismantling the place and milling the several tons of rock comprising its walls, so the story goes, he realized from the operation a net return of \$75,000 in silver!

—Nell Murbarger



BAIT for a KILLER

A Novel by JAMES B. HENDRYX



I

EASING his bandaged foot into a more comfortable position on the chair in front of him, Inspector Simpson, R.C. M.P., stared through the window of his little office at Black

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A Shrewd Old Mountie Proves Experience Counts

Lake Detachment at the rapidly approaching canoe. It was a birch canoe, manned by a single occupant, an Indian.

Drawing his light craft clear of the water, the native hastened toward the building. The inspector frowned.

"Another trapline dispute," he grumbled. "Why the devil can't they keep on their own limits?" He looked up at the Indian, who now stood framed in the doorway. "Well—what do you want?"

"A mans, she ees dead," the native said simply.

"What man? Where is he?"

"Name Jean Chapeau. She ees dead by hees house. Ees on islan'—Crane Lake."

"Crane Lake, eh? How do you know he's dead? Did you see him?"

"Me, I'm lan' on de islan' for pitch for feex de canoe. I'm see Jean Chapeau lay by hees door. I'm go look. She ees dead. Ees much blood. I'm t'ink she haf got shoot."

"Who shot him?" The gray eyes of the inspector narrowed menacingly as he whipped out the question.

"Me, I'm not know. I'm see Jean Chapeau lay on de groun', dead. I'm come tell de poliss."

"What's your name? Where do you live?"

"Name Johnny Beeg Ax. Live Rat Crick."

"What were you doing on Crane Lake?"

"Me, I'm trap nort' side Crane Lake. Jean Chapeau trap sout' side. I'm ponch hole in canoe on snag. Land Jean Chapeau islan' for pitch."

"You both trap Crane Lake, eh? How did you and Chapeau get along?"

The Indian appeared puzzled. "Me, I'm get 'long wit' canoe. Jean Chapeau, she get 'long wit' rowboat."

"No! No! I mean were you and Chapeau good friends? Did you like him?"

"No. Jean Chapeau no good. Sometam trap on my limit. Sometam mebbeso steal my trap."

"Sure you didn't shoot him?"

"No, I ain' shoot Jean Chapeau. Soman shoot heem."

"You married? Got wife—children?"

"Got 'oman. Seex kid."

"Do they live on Rat Crick?"

"Yes. Got shack 'bout four mile up de crick."

"Do you know McTavish? Trade at his post?"

The Indian nodded. "Many year haf trade McTavish."

"All right. I'll send a man over to Crane Lake. You can go home, but see that you stick around where we can find you if we want you."

WHEN the man had gone, the inspector scowled. "Devil of a time for a murder to pop up!" he muttered. "With the spring trading coming on at McTavish's, and Kelly off on patrol, and me laid up with a sprained ankle. And the only man I've got is just fresh from the Provinces! Oh, well—maybe it'll turn out not to be a murder after all." He raised his voice. "Hilton!"

A young officer, spick and span in his new uniform, appeared at the door, saluted, and stood at attention. Inspector Simpson suppressed a smile. This military precision was all right—in the Provinces. But now he wished that man before him was Kelly—old Corporal Kelly—wise in the ways of the North!

Kelly wouldn't have saluted and stood at attention. He would have slouched in, said "Yeah?" and slumped into a chair.

The inspector cleared his throat. "A native just reported finding a dead man in front of his own door," he told the young constable. "The dead man is Jean Chapeau, a trapper who lived on an island in Crane Lake. The Indian thinks he was shot. Kelly is off on patrol, and I'm in no shape to investigate the case, so it's up to you. Go down to the Hudson's Bay Post at the foot of the lake and find out from McTavish all you can about this Jean Chapeau. Find out what McTavish knows about this. Johnny Big Axe, too—he's the native who reported finding the body. He admitted he didn't like Chapeau. Said the man sometimes infringed on his limits and stole his traps. If Chapeau was murdered, leave no stone unturned until you bring in the man who killed him. That's all."

When He Points Out a Killer to a Young Lawman!

"Yes, sir." Constable Hilton saluted, turned on his heel, and disappeared.

Shortly Simpson watched him swing a light pack into a canoe and paddle off down the lake. . . .

Twice each year, in midwinter, and again after the ice goes out of the lakes and rivers in the spring, the scattered trappers of the outlands, with their women and their children, their dogs, and most of their worldly possessions, journey to the trading posts to barter their season's catch for the necessities and the little luxuries of life.

The trading period is a gala time in the Northland. From far and near trappers come and pitch their tepees about the posts. There is feasting and dancing by night, and endless bargaining by day.

in various capacities, and Andrew McDood, a Scotch trapper who had married a native woman and lived with her and their family of half-breed children in a cabin at the point where Black River flows out of the lake, a few miles from the post.

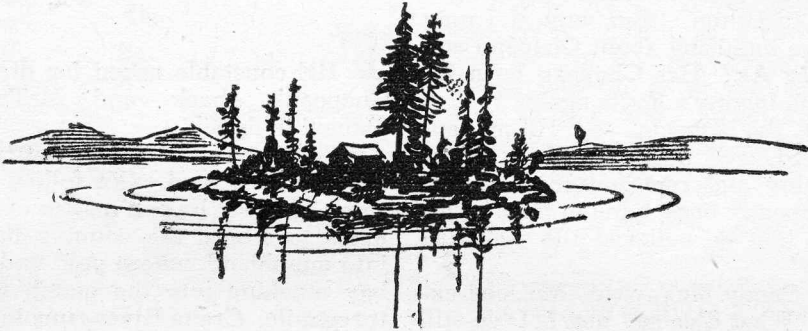
"Do you know a man named Jean Chapeau?" Hilton asked McTavish.

"Aye." The word rumbled from the factor's beard.

Hilton was aware that the eyes of all were upon his new uniform. He flushed slightly.

"What do you know of him?" he asked. "What is his reputation?"

McTAVISH whittled at a plug of tobacco he drew from his pocket, "W-e-e-l," he drawled "I would not say



Old acquaintances are renewed, and new ones made. Births and deaths are discussed, and there is much talk of the scarcity or abundance of the fur bearers.

At Black Lake Post, McTavish, the factor, had set June 20th as the opening date for spring trading. By that time the rivers and the lakes in his district were sure to be free of ice.

On the afternoon of the tenth of June Constable Hilton stepped into the log trading room to find McTavish, his chief trader, and the company clerk sitting about eyeing with approval the shelves well-stocked against the expected trade, and speculating upon the number of furs they would bale this season.

With them were several "Company Indians," natives employed by the company

Jean Chapeau is a gude mon, nor yet a bad one."

"I would not trust the mon far," volunteered McDood. "D'ye mind, Mac, at the Christmas trading Joe Bedore caught him cheating with the dice? And how, when Bedore accused him, Chapeau knocked him doon, and was giving him the boots when ye interfered? But Bedore'll settle yon score yet. I seen the devil's own glint in his eye when he got up."

"Foolish mon!" the factor said impatiently. "Joe Bedore would not harm him. They was both a bit tipsy. And what happens in liquor is soon forgot."

"Who is Joe Bedore?" Hilton asked. "Where does he live?"

"Joe Bedore is a trapper. He lives at the east end of Crane Lake."

"Do you know an Indian named Johnny Big Ax?"

"Aye."

"How about him? What is he like?"

"He's a gude trapper. All the Injuns is all right."

"Maybe he's all right, and maybe not," the officer retorted, and turned to McDood. "You said that Bedore would settle his score against Chapeau. Why did you say that? Did you hear him make any threats?"

"W-e-e-l, I canna say I heard any threats," the trapper admitted. "But I seen the look in his eyes when he got off the floor. And I'm telling you, mon, I would not want to be standing in Jean Chapeau's shoes, with Joe Bedore living on the same lake, and all."

McTavish packed the bowl of his pipe and held a match to the tobacco. "You talk like a fool, Andy McDood!" he rumbled between puffs. "Yon was a whisky brawl. 'Twas forgot as soon's 'twas over." He spoke to Hilton. "But why, if I may ask, was ye inquiring about Chapeau and Johnny Big Ax? Has Chapeau been infringing on Johnny's limits again?"

"He told the inspector so," Hilton answered. "Showed up at the detachment this morning and reported that he had found Chapeau's body lying in front of his door, and that he believed the man had been shot."

"There, Sandy McTavish!" McDood exclaimed. "What d'ye say now? D'ye still think yon fight was naught but a whisky brawl, soon forgot—with Jean Chapeau laying dead in his doorway?"

McTavish blew a huge cloud of smoke ceilingward. "I would not believe Joe Bedore shot Chapeau till 'tis proved on him. And might na believe it then," he added with a glance at Hilton. "Howcome, lad, that Inspector Simpson sent ye to look into a murder? I'd say 'twas a job for Corporal Kelly, or even the inspector himself."

"Corporal Kelly is away on patrol," replied Hilton a trifle stiffly, "and the inspector is laid up with a sprained ankle. Where is Crane Lake? I'm going there and investigate. And if I find that Chapeau has been murdered, I'll bring back the man who killed him."

"Well spoken, lad," McTavish approved heartily. "I wish ye luck. 'Tis only that

here in the North we know that Corporal Kelly is uncanny wise."

"Kelly's a good enough man," Hilton admitted. "Knows plenty about handling dogs and canoes and all that. But he's been here in the outlands a long time. What you men up here don't realize is that the science of criminal investigation has advanced far since Kelly has been here. He is necessarily out of touch with up-to-date methods. There is a great deal about the science of criminology that he does not know."

"Aye, maybe ye're right, lad—maybe ye're right. I've been here a long time myself. I know naught of this criminology you speak about. All I ken is that when there's been a murder or a theft committed anywhere hereabouts, Kelly's always gone out and fetched back the one that done it. But mayhap ye've a better way of getting at it. Ye've your chance now. We'll see."

II

THE constable asked for directions to Chapeau's shack, and McTavish explained in detail.

"'Tis not a hard job to get there," the Scotch factor said. "Ye follow the south shore of Black Lake a matter of five or six miles to where the country flattens out into marshland, where ye'll find a narrow bay reaching into the marsh for maybe three mile. Crane River runs into the end of the bay, and ten, twelve mile up the river ye'll come to where it widens out into Crane Lake. 'Tis a flat river, winding slow through the marshland with scarcely any current. Keep to the south side of the lake, where ye'll see a string of islands covered with scrub spruce. Jean Chapeau's shack is on a wee bit of an island—the easternmost one of the lot."

"And this Joe Bedore?" asked Hilton. "Where does he live?"

"At the east end of the lake. It'll be six, seven mile beyond Chapeau's. Ye can't miss it. His shack's at the mouth of the river that runs into the lake there."

"Where does Johnny Big Ax live?"

"He lives on Rat Crick about three, four mile up from where it runs into Crane Lake. His limits is the north side of Crane Lake, and Chapeau's is the south side, and Bedore's is the west side, includ-

ing the river."

"If ye'd come a couple days sooner, ye could have gone back with Joe Bedore," said McDood.

Hilton asked McTavish, "Was Bedore here at the post a couple of days ago?"

"Aye."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Ye dinna ask me."

"Aye, and he sold his furs for cash," volunteered McDood. About twice what he's traded in other years. And he would not wait over for the doings at the regular trading. Seems like he was in an almighty hurry to be off."

Again the constable glanced at McTavish. "He sold his fur? I heard Inspector Simpson say that the trading does not start at this post until the twentieth."

"The twentieth is the date. But, foosh, mon, a trapper can trade his fur when'er he wants to trade it. Trading dates only gives the trappers a time to get together for a bit of celebrating."

"Is it true that Bedore took cash instead of goods? And that he brought twice as much fur as usual?"

"Aye. 'Twould be maybe twice. And he took cash."

"How do you account for that?"

"I do not have to account for it."

"Where did he go when he left here?"

"Back home, I s'pose. I dinna follow him. He traded his furs, and got in his boat, and rowed off."

"Boat? Didn't he have a canoe?"

"No. Most of the trappers in the marshlands use light rowboats. They're a steadier craft for the work."

"You didn't stop to think, I suppose," Hilton said sternly, "that half the furs Bedore brought in might have been stolen from Chapeau after he killed him?"

"Foosh, mon, I dinna know Chapeau was kilt! Mayhap, had I known this criminology you was telling about, I could have looked at Bedore and seen that Chapeau was murdered."

The young officer flushed, turned abruptly on his heel, and strode out of the room.

Hilton wielded his paddle grimly. He felt that McTavish, while not exactly baiting him, had succeeded somehow in making him ridiculous in the eyes of the others. The thought rankled. From the moment he had stepped into the trading

room he had felt disapproval in the eyes of the bearded factor—a disapproval that manifested itself in the slow, appraising glance the old Scot had accorded him. That glance had swept him from top to toe, missing no detail of his spick and span ensemble, from polished boots to jauntily tilted hat.

THE constable thought, as he dug his paddle viciously into the water, Damned old fogie! Lived here so long he doesn't think anyone but an outlander is any good. Wondered why the inspector hadn't detailed Corporal Kelly on the case. Kelly—another old fogie, who's even forgotten how to salute a superior officer! Wears pacs, or moccasins, and carries his service revolver thrust under his shirt! Shaves once a week—if it suits him. And hasn't had a haircut since the devil knows when.

But I'll show them! When I come back with this Joe Bedore under arrest and enough evidence to hang him higher than Haman, they'll realize that a police officer doesn't have to go around looking like a hobo to be efficient. When I get to be an inspector in command of a Detachment, there won't be any Kellys slouching around the outfit! There'll be daily inspection and all that. And the men will be accountable for their appearance, right down to their shoe strings!

Young Hilton was a good man, else he never would have got into the service, much less would he have drawn a northern detail. But he was fresh from the Provinces and had much to learn.

Gradually his grouch left him. The sun shone high in the heavens, the light breeze lapped little wavelets against the side of the canoe in a rhythmic *slap, slap, slap*, that was soothing to the soul. Wet spots, that were springs among the rocks high on the sloping hillsides, glistened like mirrors in open spaces in the green covering of spruce. Patches of wild flowers made coloring in the glades. An occasional burst of song reached his ears from the forest where some bird sought to impress his mate.

At the head of the deep bay where the hills flattened out into marshland, a moose, standing belly-deep in the water, raised his head as the canoe rounded a point almost upon him. With lily stems hanging

from his dripping jaws, he gave one startled look and made for shore in a series of mighty plunges that sent showers of water flying in all directions. Hilton laughed and, resting his paddle athwart the gun-whales, rolled and lighted a cigarette. It was good to be alive. This was the North, as he had pictured it.

As the canoe nosed its way into the river, a great blue heron rose with harsh croaking and flapped majestically away. Wild ducks and geese rose in clouds at every bend of the river. Turtles plopped clumsily into the water from the sunning places on floating logs. And from shallow pools among the rushes sounded the deep bellow of frogs.

June days are long days in the Northland. Hilton had paddled around many bends of the sluggish river before he suddenly realized that he was hungry. He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock.

Heading for a bit of dry ground that protruded a foot above the water, Hilton landed and made a fire of driftwood. He boiled a pail of water for tea, fried some bacon, and warmed up a can of spaghetti. The smoke stung his eyes and lungs, but he welcomed the respite from the myriad mosquitoes that swarmed about him, filling the air with a steady hum.

Kneeling beside the river, he washed his face and hands. Then he ate his supper, sitting close against the smudgy fire, preferring the sting of the smoke to the taste and odor of the oily mosquito dope.

When he had washed his dishes and returned them to the canoe he judged the sun to be still an hour high. Even after it set he would have a good hour of daylight. He put more mosquito dope over his face and hands and decided to push on, hoping to reach higher ground. Here in the marsh the mosquitoes would make a comfortable night's sleep impossible.

Just as the sun was setting behind the western hills, Hilton came out upon the widening of the river that is Crane Lake. Wild fowl in incredible numbers blackened its surface, rising in clouds at the approach of the canoe, to settle a short distance further on, or circle behind him and once more darken the surface with their bodies.

HOLDING to the south shore of the lake, Hilton camped for the night

upon the first of the string of islands which, seeming to be of solid rock, rose to a height of some forty feet above the surface of the lake. It was covered with spruce and banksian trees whose roots sought substance in the shallow covering of clay, or sank deeply into the cracks and crevices in the rock.

There were mosquitoes here, but not in the myriads of the low marshland, and Hilton slept comfortably in his sleeping bag, which he had spread out on the fragrant spruce needles that covered the hard ground. His netting furnished adequate protection against the humming hordes.

The sun was high in the southeast when he was awakened by the angry chittering of a pine squirrel. The little animal was perched on a spruce stub not twenty feet from his bed, red sides flashing brightly in the sunlight, tail jerking nervously, as it chattered angrily at this invader of its domain.

After a hasty breakfast, Hilton shoved off and paddled eastward along the chain of small islands. As he progressed, he noted that the islands were longer, showed less of bare rock, and more of the deposit of heavy bluish-yellow clay that had evidently been deposited by the muddy waters of the shallow lake. Into this clay at the base of the islands and along the shore of the mainland innumerable boulders of varying sizes had been pressed by the ice, to form a ragged edging of rubble that extended from below the waterline to varying distances above it. The exposed surfaces of these loose stones had been worn smooth by the action of centuries of moving ice and, when wet, furnished slippery footing.

An hour's paddling brought the officer to the small island at the end of the chain. Not more than half a dozen acres in area, it rose scarcely six feet above the lake level at its highest point. As Hilton approached, he could see a pole-and-mud shack, consisting of a single room and a lean-to, standing a short distance back from the shoreline. A small, crudely made rowboat floated at the end of its painter that was made fast to a stake driven into the mud in knee-deep water a short distance off shore.

The young officer landed, drew his canoe from the water, and turned toward the shack. As he stood there, staring at the

thing that lay sprawled before the half-open door, he was conscious of a prickling sensation at the base of his skull. Something unutterably horrible seemed to pervade the entire slimy island. It was the young officer's first experience alone with death. The air hummed with the whine of mosquitoes, and from the surface of the lake came the squawking of waterfowl.

Lips tightly pressed, Hilton advanced to the body from which, at his approach, rose a cloud of foul, fat-bodied green flies. From a near-by tree a raven launched into the air, croaking hoarsely, and winged away to the mainland.

Chapeau's body lay upon its back, mouth wide open, eyes staring glassily, one arm flung stiffly outward. Dark blood encrusted the cheap cotton shirt front that was exposed where the unbuttoned leather coat had fallen aside. The only other garments were a pair of faded blue overalls and rubber-footed pacs into which the sockless feet had been thrust.

III

STOOPING, Hilton gingerly opened the dead man's shirt and examined the wound. A bullet of heavy caliber had entered the chest just to left of sternum, evidently piercing the heart. Turning the body over, he could find no hole in the back of the leather coat.

The bloated condition of the body precluded any thought of removing the garment so, drawing his belt knife, he slit the back of the coat from top to bottom and recovered a soft lead bullet of .45-caliber. This he wrapped in his handkerchief and placed in his pocket.

Search of the interior of the shack revealed nothing of importance, it having apparently been undisturbed. In the pole lean-to at the rear, Hilton found a few simple tools—two axes, a saw, a drawknife, and a spade. Several bunches of steel traps, evidently freshly greased and put away for the summer, dangled from pegs by their chains.

The dirt floor in front of the crude work bench was covered with shavings, evidently made when Chapeau fashioned stretching frames for his furs. But there was no fur.

Returning to the landing, Hilton faced about and, in his mind's eyes, strove to

reconstruct the crime. Whoever had shot Chapeau had probably landed here, called to the owner of the shack, and when he had stepped through the doorway, had shot him dead.

That it was a cold-blooded murder there could be no doubt. Chapeau had not expected trouble, or he would never have stepped from the shack unarmed. His rifle lay across a couple of pegs driven into the wall just inside the doorway.

Glancing down, Hilton's attention was attracted by a smooch of red upon the rounded surface of one of the stones half-embedded in the clay at his feet. Stooping, he found similar red stains on several other stones close beside the first. Examination showed the substance to be red paint. Evidently a boat of some kind with its bottom painted red had been drawn up onto the stones.

Hauling the tethered rowboat ashore, Hilton tilted it. The bottom was painted white, as were the sides. Picking up one of the stones that showed the paint marks, the constable wrapped it in a fragment of canvas he found nearby and placed it in the canoe.

His job, as he now saw it, was to bury the body, then find a man who owned a boat with a red bottom and who also owned a rifle or pistol of .45-caliber.

As he was about to proceed to the shack to get the spade, his eyes fell upon a small object nestling in a crevice between two stones. Stooping, he picked up an empty brass rifle shell of .45-caliber. Placing this with his bullet in his handkerchief, he measured the distance from the red-smooched stones to the spot where he had picked up the shell, paced off the distance from the landing to the body, and made careful notes in his book.

Hilton spent the next two hours in digging a shallow grave in the hard clay beside the shack. Wrapping the body in a blanket from the bunk, he deposited it in the grave, covered it, split out a crude slab upon which he penciled the name "JEAN CHAPEAU," and drove it in at the head of the grave. Then he stepped into his canoe and shoved off for the eastern end of the lake—toward the cabin of Joe Bedore.

As McTavish had predicted, Hilton found no trouble in locating the cabin close beside the mouth of the river that flowed in from the eastward. But the place

was deserted. No smoke rose from the stovepipe that protruded through the dirt roof, and there was no boat at the landing.

As he stepped ashore, the first thing that caught Hilton's attention was the fact that all the stones at the edge of the water in front of the shack were marked with the same shade of red paint he had found at Chapeau's. Evidently a boat with a red bottom had been repeatedly drawn ashore here.

CALLING loudly and receiving no answer, the constable proceeded to the shack, pushed open the door, and inspected the interior. The furniture consisted of a pole bunk upon which was a covering of spruce boughs, a crude pole table upon which were no dishes, and a pole bench. The shelves of a crude cupboard built against the wall behind the sheet-iron stove were bare, save for several empty paper cartons and an empty bottle or two.

There were no tools or traps anywhere about. But behind the shack Hilton found a pile of wooden stretching frames for furs. No furs were in evidence, and the officer's lips set more firmly as he remembered that both McDood and McTavish had told him that Bedore had sold almost twice his usual catch and had departed from the post without waiting for the festivities that always accompanied the spring trading.

"His own furs—and Chapeau's," muttered the officer grimly. "And if he owns a red-bottomed boat and a forty-five rifle, Mr. Joe Bedore is going to find himself in plenty of trouble. But first, I've got to find him."

The fact that Bedore's boat was gone showed that the trapper had undertaken at least the first leg of his flight by water. Only two avenues of escape were open to him. He could double back past the post and go out by way of Black River, or he could head up this river that flowed in from the eastward—away from the post, and from the police. Hilton decided that the latter was the more obvious route.

"He's got everything he owns except his shack and his stove in that rowboat," he muttered. "I can certainly make better time than he can. Anyway, the race is on. Here goes!"

Heading up the river, in which was a faster current than in the one connecting

Crane and Black Lakes, Hilton settled down to steady paddling. Five miles up the river he came to a jam of driftwood that blocked the channel. And as he worked the canoe over it he noted that a protruding knot on one of the logs bore a smooch of red paint.

On the second day of his search, toward noon, the Mounty rounded a bend and came upon his man seated on the bank beside a little campfire above which was suspended a pail. Loosening the service revolver in its holster, Hilton drove his canoe ashore and accosted the trapper who regarded him with a look of mounting fear.

"Are you Joe Bedore?" Hilton asked, stepping from the canoe.

"*Oui*, I'm Joe Bedore."

"Don't make a move to get the rifle out of that boat!" warned Hilton. "You are under arrest, and it is my duty to inform you that anything you say may be used against you."

"Why you make me arres'?" asked the man. "I ain't keel Jean Chapeau."

"Who said anything about Jean Chapeau? How do you know he's dead if you didn't kill him?"

"Me, I'm come pas' hees place. I stop an' pull up my boat, and take ze bottle for giv' Jean ze dreenk. An' *sacré!* I'm look, an' Jean lays dead by ze door—an' blood ees on hees shirt! Zen I go 'way from zere. I'm t'ink ze police say I keel Jean Chapeau."

"You knew right well they'd say you killed him—because you did kill him! That's clear enough."

"*Non! Non!* I'm no keel heem! Some-wan keel heem—not me!"

"I suppose you and Jean were good friends, eh? Is that why you were going to give him a drink?"

"*Oui*. Jean Chapeau, me good frien'."

"He was, eh? That isn't what they say down at McTavish's. How about that fight you and Chapeau had there at the Christmas trading?"

"*Oui*, zat is why I'm t'ink ze police say I'm keel heem. We haf ze leetle fight. I'm say Jean cheat wiz ze dice. An' Jean, he knock me down. We git leetle bit dronk, zat tam. We no fight no more. We good frien's."

"Why didn't you report it to the police when you found him dead?"

BEDORE insisted, "Me, I'm 'fraid ze police say I'm keel him."

"Where did you go after you found Chapeau was dead?"

"I'm go home, tak' my stuff in ze boat, an' pull oop ze rivaire so police no kin fin' me."

"You claim you stopped at Chapeau's after you'd been to McTavish's with the furs, eh? You're sure it wasn't before that?"

"Non. I'm sell ze furs. Get ze bottle from McDood. Come back, an' stop on ze islan' to give Jean Chapeau ze drink."

"How much fur did Chapeau have this spring? Did he have good luck with his traps?"

"Oui. But not so good lak me."

"Listen, Bedore," Hilton said sternly. "I know you took about twice as many furs to the post as you ever took before. When I stopped at Chapeau's, there weren't any furs there, and Chapeau hadn't traded his. Because you shot him, stole his furs, and sold them along with your own. That's why you had much to sell!"

"Non! I'm no see Jean Chapeau's furs. Me, I'm got ze good luck wiz ze traps. Get ze beeg ketch. Trap some new lake zis spring."

"Ever see this before?" Hilton asked, slipping the empty brass cartridge case from his pocket and holding it before the man's eyes.

"Oui. Zat wan of my shell—forty-five-ninety."

"Do you know where I found it?"

"Non."

"I picked it up right where you pumped it out of your rifle after you shot Chapeau. It was at Chapeau's landing, right near the place where some of the red paint was scraped off the bottom of your boat when you pulled up on the rocks. I've got the bullet that killed Chapeau—and that's a forty-five-ninety too. You might as well come clean, Bedore. There isn't a chance in the world that you didn't kill Chapeau. I've got evidence enough against you to hang ten men. Why not tell about it and get it over with?"

"Non. Me—I'm no keel heem. I'm not shoot heem when I'm land to his place. An' I not pump no shell out my rifle. Jean Chapeau ees already shoot when I'm see heem."

"All right. Stick to your story. We'll see if you can make the judge and the jury believe it. Throw your stuff in the boat and pull back down the river. I'll take your rifle with me. And don't try any monkey business, like trying to get away, or I'll have to shoot you."

IV

A FEW days after Constable Hilton's arrival at the Detachment with his prisoner, Corporal Kelly returned from his patrol. After making out his brief report, he hunched his chair around to face the inspector and filled his pipe.

"The spring trading'll be starting in a few days now," he remarked. "I s'pose I'd better slip down to McTavish's and hang around till the rush is over. The Injuns got holt of some hooch last trading time. I know McTavish wasn't putting none out, but they got it somewheres, and my guess is that damned Andy McDood had something to do with it. The lazy cuss seems to get along somehow and keep that mess of breed kids in grub and clothing—and he hangs around the post too much to do enough trapping to keep 'em."

"Maybe McTavish employs him," suggested Simpson.

"I don't think so. Mac's got a trader and a clerk and four, five Injuns. I never saw McDood doing any work there. He just hangs around."

"I'd figured on sending you over to Big Crow when you got back," said the inspector. "I got word that some Injuns abandoned an old blind woman to die on the trail last winter. We must investigate. That's a practice that's got to be stopped."

Corporal Kelly blew a cloud of smoke from his lungs. "I swung around that way and investigated it already. It's in my report."

"Was it true—that they abandoned the old woman?"

"Yeah. They done it, all right."

"Did you make any arrests?"

"No. There wasn't no call to arrest anyone. Injuns ain't sentimental like white folks. They're more practical."

"Sentimental! Man, it was murder! Just think of that poor woman—old, and blind, and helpless—left to die on the trail!"

Kelly nodded. "Yeah. But there's other things to think about, too. I've been living

amongst Injuns a lot longer'n you have. And I savvy them. They ain't so much different from white folks, once you get to know 'em. They've got the same feelings we've got—like love, and hate, and all that. Only they ain't so apt to show it.

"This Injun, Pe-tah, lives up on the Big Crow with his wife and his old mother and two kids, three and five years old. The trapping was bad in there last winter. It's an off year for rabbits, and they couldn't snare enough to keep the family going. No moose showed up along the river, and they got mighty short of grub. Besides that, they lost all but two of their dogs with distemper—and then one of the kids took sick. So they loaded what grub they had on the sled, and put the kids on it, too, and hit out for the mission on Cree Lake, seventy-five miles away.

"Pe-tah and his wife pulled with the dogs, and the old woman followed along. There wasn't room on the sled for another pound, what with their bedding and all. They run into a bunch of snowstorms, and the grub run so low that it didn't look like it would last till they got to the mission, even though they was all eating only just enough to keep them alive. Then, the old woman give out.

"I've known Pe-tah a long time," Kelly continued soberly. "He's a good Injun. If you could have heard him tell the story like he told it to me, you'd want to pat him on the back and tell him he done right—and that's just what I done. You see, when she give out, he was up against a decision that no man would want to face. It was the lives of his wife and kids—young lives—against the life of his mother—an old life, nearly done. And it wasn't a bit easier for him to decide to go off and leave his old mother there than it would have been for you or me to leave ours. The only difference is, he done it, and we wouldn't have. He got through to the mission with his wife and kids alive, and we wouldn't have.

"You see, they couldn't camp there and wait till she died. They didn't have grub enough. And if Pe-tah or his wife got any weaker, they couldn't have pulled the sled, and they'd all have died. There wasn't even grub enough for Pe-tah to try to make a run to the mission and come back with more. It was the old woman or the kids. And Pe-tah and his wife decided in

favor of the kids. The old woman would have died, anyway, along with 'em all.

"They made it through—but they just *about* made it. They was all so weak that another day on the trail would have seen their finish. Pe-tah told the truth, because I stopped in at the mission and checked his story with Father Giroux. Don't you see, Inspector? They *had* to give them kids a break!"

SIMPSON admitted gravely, "Hm-m-m, mighty tough! Only practical thing to do, I suppose. Glad to know about that case. Sort of teaches a man not to jump at conclusions. That things aren't always what they seem, and all that. I guess maybe you'd better slip down to McTavish's. I thought of sending Hilton down there, but you've had more experience. Good lad, though, Hilton. Better, I guess, than either of us gave him credit for. Brought in a murderer the other day. Did a good quick job, and a smart one. His evidence is conclusive."

"Who got murdered?"

"A French breed trapper named Jean Chapeau."

"Who did Hilton fetch in?" Kelly asked curiously.

"Another French breed trapper. Joe Bedore, his name is."

"Joe Bedore, eh? I know Joe. Good man. Did he confess?"

"No. Even in the face of conclusive evidence he stubbornly denies his guilt."

"Evidence isn't always as conclusive as it looks. You just said that things ain't always what they seem. Any witnesses?"

"No."

"Evidence is all circumstantial, eh?"

"Certainly. But you know as well as I do that a perfect chain of circumstances makes the best evidence in the world. A witness can go on the stand and lie like the devil about what happened. But circumstances can't lie. And Hilton has worked out an almost perfect chain of circumstances."

"'Almost' ain't quite good enough."

"Oh, come, Kelly! You won't give the lad credit because you think he's—well, an upstart."

Kelly puffed at his pipe, his eyes on the toes of his disreputable pacs. "He keeps his shoes shined nice," he said irrelevantly. "Where you got Joe? I'd like to have

a talk with him."

"Hilton's got him out for a walk. Can't keep him cooped up all the time. Here they come now. Good idea, your seeing him. He might talk to you."

When the constable came in with his manacled prisoner, Kelly took the man into the bunk room. Ten minutes later the corporal returned to the office, where the other two officers were waiting.

"Did he confess?" asked the inspector.

"No. Joe won't never confess to that murder, because he never done it."

"What!" Hilton flushed angrily, as the word exploded from his lips.

"What makes you think he didn't?" the inspector asked.

"He told me so."

"But a man would lie like the devil to save himself from being hanged!"

"Yeah. But he'd be a fool to, when the truth would answer better."

"Maybe," suggested Hilton with just the hint of sarcasm in his voice, "if the corporal would go over the evidence of Bedore's guilt."

"I might, at that," Kelly admitted, ignoring the young officer's tone. "If the inspector don't mind, I'd like to go over it."

Hilton produced the stone with its smooch of red paint, the empty cartridge shell, the bullet that had killed Chapeau, and Bedore's rifle.

"In the first place," he began, "I learned at McTavish's that Chapeau and Bedore had had a fight there at the time of the Christmas trading."

CORPORAL Kelly nodded. "Yeah. I heard about it. Whisky brawl. Didn't amount to nothing. If it had, why would Bedore wait half a year to kill Chapeau? He had plenty of chance to do it sooner."

"His reason may have been that the longer he let Chapeau live, the more furs he'd have. I also learned at McTavish's that Bedore brought in about twice his normal amount of furs this spring. And that he sold them for cash, instead of trading for goods, as was his custom. He brought them in before the regular trading time—which is not his custom, and he seemed to be in a great hurry to be gone. I found no furs at all at Chapeau's, though he is known to be a good trapper. But I did find other things there—this stone, for instance." He handed Kelly the stone.

"You will notice that it is smooched with red paint."

Turning the stone slowly over and over in his hands, the corporal nodded. "Yeah, I can notice that, all right."

"I also found this empty rifle cartridge. You will note that it is a forty-five-ninety shell. Bedore admitted that it was his. And here is the bullet that passed through Chapeau's body, but failed to pass on through the leather coat he was wearing when he was shot. The bullet is also of forty-five-ninety caliber."

"That's right," Kelly admitted, examining the shell and the bullet.

"And here is Bedore's rifle—a forty-five-ninety. I may add that the bottom of Bedore's boat is painted with the same shade of red as appears on the stone, and that several other stones grouped closely about this one were also smeared with red paint when Bedore drew his boat up at Chapeau's landing before he shot him."

As Kelly listened, he idly flaked thin layers of dried clay from the stone.

"And I picked up that empty shell from a spot just eight feet from that stone, where it had been ejected after Bedore fired the shot," Hilton went on. "We're sending the bullet and the shell to the laboratory in Ottawa for microscopic examination. When we get the photographic prints back, I shall be able to convince you that the bullet that killed Chapeau had been fired from Bedore's rifle, and no other. You see, Corporal, the science of criminology has made long strides since your day."

The old corporal nodded. "Yeah. It's a long stride from here to Ottawa, all right. A hell of a long stride to find out a little thing like that. When I was a young fellow, we didn't have no lab'ratory, with microscopes, and fingerprint records, and all that, so we had to get along as best we could with eyesight and common sense. Take this here bullet and shell, for instance. I can tell whether they was fired in Joe's rifle without sending 'em clean down to Ottawa and waiting for some photographs to come back."

Stepping to the door of the bunkroom, he called, "Joe, you make your own bullets, don't you? Load your own shells?"

"Oui."

"Where's your bullet mold?"

"He ees een my pack."

V

FUMBLING in Joe Bedore's pack, Kelly produced the bullet mold and handed it to Hilton.

"Look close and see if you don't find a slight defect, like a rust spot, in the mold about an eighth of an inch from the butt end of the bullet."

"That's right," Hilton admitted, holding the mold to the light.

Kelly handed him the bullet. "Now, if you'll look close, you'll see a corresponding mark in the bullet—a slight indentation made by the rust spot in the mold. That proves that the bullet was Joe's, all right. There ain't a chance in a million that two molds would have the same defect in the same place. And now we'll see about the shell."

Selecting a loaded cartridge from Bedore's pack, Kelly slipped it into the rifle and, stepping to the door, fired it into the ground and ejected the shell. Picking it up, he examined it, comparing it with the empty shell Hilton had handed him.

"Yep—that shell you picked up at Chapeau's landing was fired in this rifle of Joe's, all right. Look—you can see exactly the same firing-pin dent in the caps, and the same ejector marks on the shell. I've got a magnifying glass in my pocket you can take—in case your eyesight isn't so good."

"I guess that's right," Hilton admitted a bit less cockily. "But you've certainly clinched the case against Joe Bedore."

"Against Joe's rifle, yes. But it's Joe they'll be trying for murder, not his rifle. After all, it's the man that fires the rifle bullet that kills someone that's guilty of murder, not the man who owns the rifle."

"Come, come Kelly!" exclaimed the inspector. "That's merely quibbling! There's no evidence whatever that this rifle has been out of Bedore's possession for a moment!"

"I haven't seen no evidence that says it ain't, either."

"Any fair-minded jury would convict Bedore on the evidence."

"Yeah. That's what I'm afraid of. That's why I'd better get busy and fetch in the one that done it. They'd hang Joe, sure as hell, on what evidence Hilton's dug up."

"That's a sheer waste of time! And right when we're shorthanded, too. I realize,

Kelly, that Bedore is a friend of yours and that—"

"Friend or enemy, that part don't make no difference. It's whether he killed Chapeau or not that counts. And since when has it become quibbling and a waste of time for the police to save an innocent man from getting hung?"

Hilton, who expected a scathing outburst from the inspector against this subordinate who was facing him down, received the surprise of his life when it didn't come. Instead, Inspector Simpson sat drumming for a moment on his desk top.

"All right, Kelly," he said. "Go ahead and investigate the case. I confess I don't see a chance in the world for you to establish Bedore's innocence in the face of the evidence. If anyone but you had suggested it, I'd say it was nonsense. But you've had more experience in the outlands than Hilton or I have had. How long do you expect to be on the case?"

"It hadn't ought to take long. Couple of days, mebbee."

"A couple of days!" The inspector smiled incredulously. "If that's all the time you need, you had best take Hilton with you. If you can actually establish Bedore's innocence and bring in the guilty man that quick, I've got a hunch that Hilton can learn more about police work in those two days than he could in two years of routine duty."

Stepping to the bunkroom door, Kelly called, "Hey, Joe, come here, and I'll take them cuffs off."

"Hold on, Kelly!" protested the inspector. "That man is a suspected murderer, with plenty of evidence against him! Helpless as I am with this damned ankle, what's to prevent him from pulling out?"

"Me." Kelly grinned.

HE DREW a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs from the wrists of the prisoners.

"Now, Joe," he said to the man who stood before him, "there's a couple of sleds and sets of dog harness around here that need overhauling. You get busy and fix 'em up. And when you get that done, you can start in and paint them two canoes that's there on the beach. I've got to go and fetch in the man that shot Chapeau. Don't make a fool of yourself and pull

out of here before I get back. You wouldn't have no more chance of getting away than you've got of going to heaven, because I'd follow you clean to the north pole. You savvy?"

"Owi," agreed Bedore. "I'm feex ze sled, ze harness, ze canoe. I'm no run 'way."

As the man stepped outside, Kelly winked at the inspector. "Short-handed, like we are, it's a good chance to get in two, three days of free labor."

"Get out of here!" The inspector grinned. "And mind, if you don't come back with a prisoner, your name's going to be Dennis, instead of Kelly. . . ."

Corporal Kelly and Hilton forced the canoe toward McTavish's post against a headwind.

"Anyway," the corporal remarked to the young officer, grinning, "there ain't no room to rent in them shoulders of yours. They're full of good solid meat and bone."

"Meaning, I suppose," the young constable called back over his shoulder, "that there's plenty of empty room in my head?"

"Not so much but what time and patience will fill it. I was only joking, son. Sort of hinting that you young fellows got a lot to learn."

"Sure we have," Hilton admitted, without rancor. "But in this case, I'm willing to bet a month's pay that I'm right."

"Save your money, son. A good-looking young fellow like you will be getting married one of these days, and you'll need it then."

"I'll never marry," retorted the constable glumly. "That's all over with. That's why I joined the service."

"Oh—to forget, eh? Well, I've known quite a few youngsters that joined on to forget. Most of 'em got to be pretty good."

"At policing?"

"No. At forgetting things."

When the two entered McTavish's post it was to find only the factor and the trader in the trading room. Kelly stepped up to the crude counter.

"Hello, Mac! Sold any green paint lately?"

"You mean red paint," corrected Hilton.

"Green paint," Kelly repeated.

"W-e-e-l, let's see." Moving to his desk, the factor opened a book and ran a gnarled finger down the page of entries. "Tom Clawhammer got a quart on April the

ninth. Klat-sic-~~to~~ got a gallon on May the fifteenth. Andy McDood got two quarts on May the seventeenth. And that's all the green paint that's gone out this spring. It moves faster at the trading. They'll be painting their boats and canoes in the summertime."

Walking to the door, Kelly let his eyes rove over the encampment of tepees that dotted the big clearing, where the people of the outlands were already collecting from far places for the trading. He turned back to McTavish.

"Done any trading yet?"

"None to speak of—a fur, mebbe, here and there that someone trades in if they run short of tea or a bit of sugar or tobacco. Joe Bedore's the only one that's done his trading and gone away. And the word come in that Hilton, yonder, has got him arrested for killing Jean Chapeau."

"Yeah. Well, so long, Mac. We'll be dragging along. Got a little matter to 'tend to. Be seeing you in a couple of days. I kind of figgered on hanging around here during the trading this spring, to see if I could find out where that liquor was coming from."

THE two officers departed, heading for Crane Lake. They landed at Chapeau's island, and Hilton pointed to the newly made grave.

"I buried him there," he said. "The clay was hard, and I was in a hurry, so I didn't go very deep. Do you want him exhumed?"

"Do I want him what?"

"Exhumed—dug up—so you can examine him?"

"Holy smokes, no! It's a live man I'm hunting, not a dead one. You buried him. I'll take your word he was dead. We'll just look around here and see what we can see."

The interior of the shack yielded nothing of interest, and passing around to the lean-to, Kelly glanced at the tools. Picking up the draw-knife from the bench, he examined it. He stopped and picked up a handful of shavings, scrutinized them closely, and thrust them into his pocket. Then, carrying the draw-knife, he led the way to the landing.

Hilton pointed to the stones, upon the surface of which the red paint showed.

"Here's where Bedore drew up his boat," he exclaimed. "And just eight feet to the right is where I picked up the empty shell. The distance from here to where the body lay is just nineteen paces."

Kelly smiled. "What difference does them distances make?" he asked politely.

"Why, the shell, lying there, eight feet to the right, shows that it was ejected from a rifle held in the hands of a man who stood there."

"Shows that it *could have been*, not that it *was*," Kelly corrected. "But go on."

"Well, the distance to the body, why—why—"

"Yeah. That's what I was getting at, son. You done right to measure the distance from here to where you found the shell. But stepping off the distance to the corpse was a waste of time. It wouldn't make no difference if it was nineteen paces or a hundred and nineteen. We'll go over to Bedore's now and see what we can find. Then we'll be hitting back to Mac's."

As he talked, Kelly picked up several of the red-smooched stones and placed them in his pack.

At Bedore's Kelly's keen eyes took in every detail.

"You see," Hilton said, "he took everything he owned with him, except the stove, and he'd have taken that if he'd had room in his boat. He was leaving this place permanently. I overtook him miles up the river."

"Yeah. He was scared. You couldn't blame him none, what with the trail of evidence he left behind, besides knowing that the police was sure to find out about that scrap he had with Chapeau. Here's something he didn't take with him—his drying frames. Didn't you notice them?"

"Sure I did. What about them?"

"We'll fetch 'em along for evidence."

"Evidence?"

"Yeah. A man don't never want to overlook evidence in a murder case, or he'll go barking up the wrong tree."

At the landing, Kelly pried out one of the stones from the rubble on the beach, and placed it in his pack sack. A few feet farther on he pried out another and placed it with the first.

"I didn't think it was necessary to bring in any of these stones," Hilton said with a glance at the red-smearred rubble at their

feet. "You can't convict a man by showing that he landed at his own landing."

"No, but it might help to acquit him if someone else had landed there, too," Kelly replied. "Here's something you want to learn right on the start, Hilton—a good policeman will work just as hard to secure an innocent man's acquittal as he will to secure a guilty man's conviction."

VI

PROCEEDING directly to McTavish's post, Kelly and Hilton entered the trading room. Andrew McDood was there, hobnobbing with the factor and several of the Indians who were hanging about the post. Striding up to the squaw man, Kelly drew out a pair of handcuffs.

"This ain't a hooch case, McDood. It's murder and robbery. Ye're under arrest for the murder of Jean Chapeau and the theft of his furs. And it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you. Come on—let's get these bracelets on you. Then we'll go down to your place and pick up Chapeau's furs."

The huge man's face paled, and for an instant it seemed that he was about to hurl himself upon the officer. But he evidently thought better of it and thrust out his hands. Kelly snapped the cuffs about the thick, hairy wrists.

"Yon furs are my own!" he growled. "I trapped 'em myself."

"Yeah? When? You must have set your trapline between here and your place and run it nights then. You've been hanging around here, daytimes, all winter."

"The woman trapped the heft of it, and I been buying a bit from the Injuns, hither and yon."

"Yeah? Buy any from Chapeau?"

"No. I tell ye, mon, I haven't been to Crane Lake and I have not seen Jean Chapeau sin' the Christmas trading—the time he had the fight with Joe Bedore. There's the mon that shot Chapeau! He hated him, Bedore did, for knocking him down right in this room! McTavish knows the time. Don't ye, Mac?"

"Aye. But 'twas naught save a drunken brawl. I don't believe Joe Bedore kilt Chapeau."

"Ye'll not be finding any forty-five rifle at my place, Kelly," said McDood. "And Joe Bedore's gun is a forty-five."

"Who said anything about a forty-five?" Kelly flashed. "What's a forty-five got to do with it?"

"Why—why, can ye not see, mon? I mean, if Jean Chapeau was kilt with a forty-five, 'twas Joe Bedore that kilt um. I have not got a forty-five. I have naught but an auld smooth-bore trade gun."

"That just about clinches the case against you, McDood," Kelly said. "You're a fool for admitting you own a smooth-bore. You'd ought to hid it."

"But Chapeau was shot with a forty-five!" cried the Scot.

"Yeah?" drawled Kelly, grinning into the man's eyes. "And how do *you* know what he was shot with? You just got through telling us you hadn't been to Crane Lake, nor seen Chapeau, since the Christmas trading."

"A mon told me!" cried the Scot. "Aye, an Injun it was. He stopped at the island and seen Chapeau laying there before his dure!"

"All right, McDood." Kelly shrugged. "If you can produce that Injun it might help your case some. But if you can't, it looks from here like you'd talked yourself into a hanging. Come on—we're wasting time. . . ."

WITH the prisoner chained to a stanchion in the bunk room, Inspector Simpson glanced at Hilton as the three officers seated themselves in the little office.

"Well, lad, did you learn something about policing?" he asked.

"Not a thing, sir!" the young constable said flatly. "I've been with Corporal Kelly every minute since we left here, and there isn't a single thing he's said or done that, to my mind, makes any sense—from asking McTavish about green paint to dragging in a lot of drying frames from Bedore's, and leading McDood to believe Chapeau was shot with a smooth-bore, and then bringing in a lot of furs that McDood says his wife trapped! For one thing, how can Corporal Kelly possibly prove that McDood didn't buy some of them furs and his wife trap the rest, just as he claimed? One fur is almost exactly like another. With Chapeau dead, how can it be proved that these are his furs? I tell you, sir, if Corporal Kelly has made out a convincing case against McDood,

then I'm a one-legged donkey! At least, I know I'll never make a policeman."

Corporal Kelly grinned broadly. "Sure you will, son. The thing's as simple as two and two makes four, just as plain as the nose on your face. Let's go over it step by step. In the first place, when you told me Joe Bedore had shot Chapeau and robbed him, I knew you were off the track. You see, I know Joe Bedore. But that ain't evidence. You remember it didn't take us long, right here in this room, with no microscopes and laboratories, to prove that Chapeau was shot with Joe's rifle. That was a score against Joe.

"You'd noticed quite a few things when you was looking for evidence, but there was other things you didn't notice. Take that stone, for instance, that you fetched from Chapeau's landing. After I'd looked at it, I could see that someone else had been to Chapeau's before Joe landed there. And that whoever it was didn't want no one to know he'd been there. And I seen that this one had a boat with a green bottom. See for yourself."

Hilton rose abruptly, crossed the room, and picked up the stone, carried it to the window, and examined it. "I can't see any green paint under this red," he said.

"You're looking on the wrong side of the stone, son. Just scrape off some of that clay with your thumbnail from the other side like I done, and you'll find a smooch of green paint under it. Find it?"

"Why, yes. But this was the under side of the stone!"

"Yeah. It was when you picked it up. The minute I seen it, I knew it had been turned over. You see, the side with the green paint and the clay on it is the top side of the stone. It's worn slick and smooth by the ice, just like all the other stones along the edge of these lakes. The under side is rough—and it's the rough side that's got the red paint on it. It got there after the stone had been turned over. You see, when McDood was leaving Chapeau's, he noticed the green paint his boat had left on several stones at the landing, so he turned 'em over and replaced 'em, thinking no one would notice. There's a couple more of 'em in my sack—you remember I picked 'em up there. And you'll find the same green paint markings on them.

"You see, Bedore told me he didn't take

his rifle along when he sold his furs to McTavish. He said he got word that his sister was sick in Saskatchewan and he aimed to hurry down there; so he traded early, and he sold for cash. I asked him if he'd told anyone about aiming to go out of the country, and he said he didn't tell anyone but Andy McDood, who was hanging around the post. Joe had a big catch and it took better'n two days to sell it. It was during them two days that McDood slipped over to Crane Lake, got Joe's rifle out of his shack, shot and robbed Chapeau, then returned the rifle.

"You'll recollect that I took a couple of stones from Bedore's landing, too. If you'll get 'em out of my pack and examine 'em close, you'll see a touch of green mixed in with the red on 'em. That proves that McDood did land at Bedore's. He landed there twice—once when he got the rifle and again when he returned it. You notice, I s'pose, that I picked the stone up at two different places at Joe's landing. McDood didn't bother to turn them stones over like he done at Chapeau's. There was so many red-smooched ones that he prob'ly never noticed them slight smooches of green paint amongst 'em—but I did.

Hilton shook his head. "I'll say you did."

"**N**OW, to go back to Chapeau's," Kelly went on. "You'll remember that I picked up the draw-knife off the bench and looked it over. I seen three nicks in it, so I picked up a handful of the shavings off the ground and seen the rough lines in 'em made by the nicks in the knife. So I shoved them in my pocket and took the draw-knife, too.

"Then, at Bedore's, I found Joe's drying frames, and I seen that they was made with a knife that didn't have no nicks in it. You see, if he'd stole Chapeau's furs and pulled the skins off the drying frames—the frames made with Chapeau's knife—the frames would have showed them rough lines the same as the shavings showed."

Hilton shook his head.

"You're too good for me, Corporal," he said with a wry grin. "From the time I heard about that fight, and McDood and McTavish told me about Bedore's trading in twice his usual amount of furs, and taking cash instead of goods, and leaving in

a hurry, I was pretty sure he was the man I wanted. And when I found that Chapeau had been shot with a forty-five, then found just such a rifle in Bedore's possession, and that the bottom of his boat was painted red, I was convinced of his guilt. This other stuff is too deep for me."

"It won't be, son. You'll learn. I know it looked mighty bad for Joe. But when things are explained, they're simple. Joe trapped some new lakes and had unusually good luck. That accounts for his double dose of furs. He wanted to see his sick sister. That accounts for his hurry and his taking cash instead of goods. But to get back to the evidence. You'll remember that McTavish told me that only three people had bought green paint this spring. Two of 'em was Injuns. McDood was the other one. So I figgered it was McDood. We seen that the bottom of his boat was painted green. And, by the way, it had to be a boat painted this spring, or the paint wouldn't have came off on the rocks.

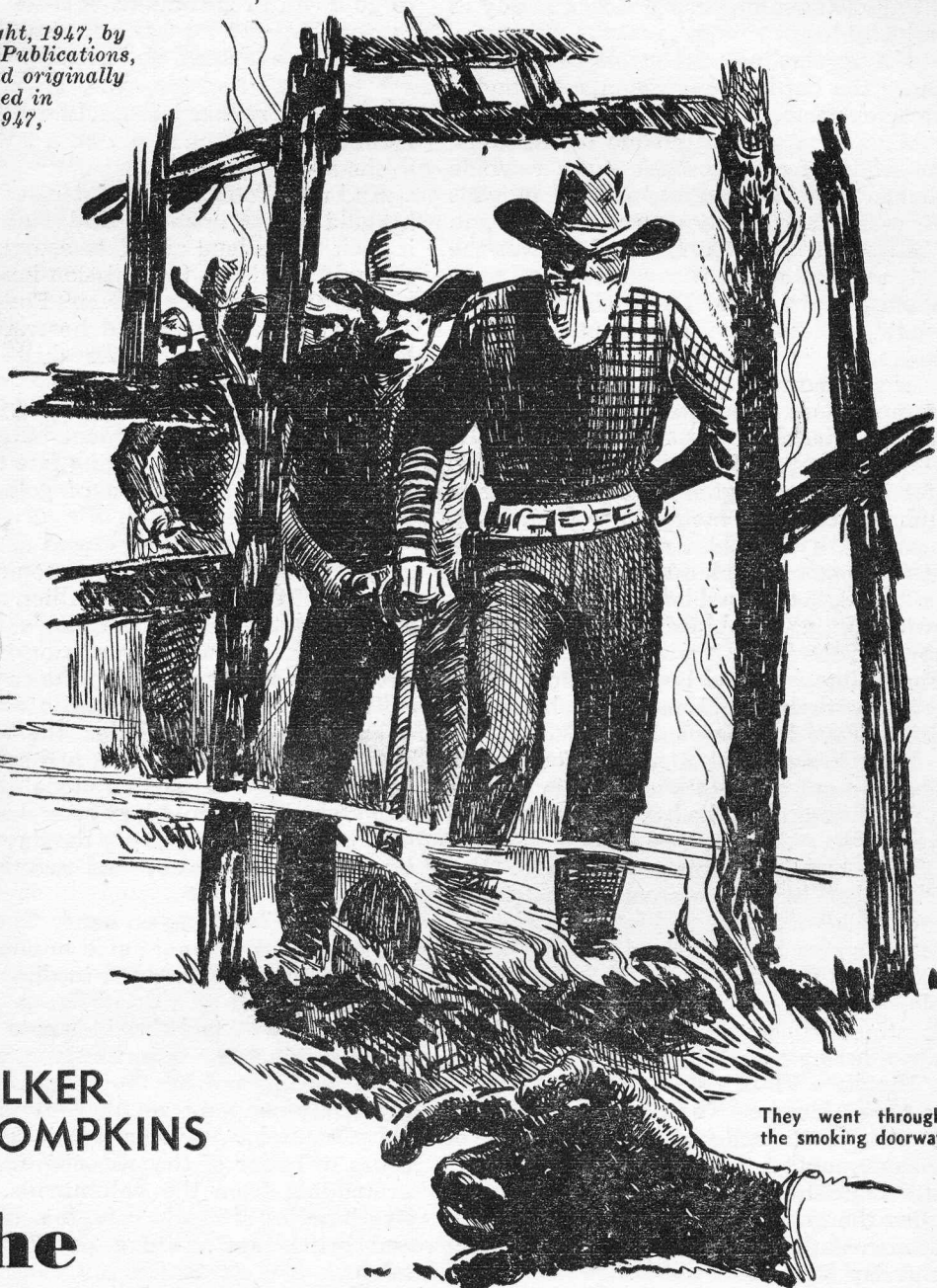
"I guess that clears up everything, except what I said to McDood about his smooth-bore. That was just a trick of the trade—to make him come right and admit he knew that Chapeau had been shot with a forty-five. So now all we've got to do is yank a few of them skins we fetched up from McDood's off their stretching frames and look 'em over. And I can tell you before we start in just what we'll find. We'll find that every one of them boards will show rough lines on 'em—lines that'll correspond exactly to the nicks in Chapeau's draw-knife. That's how we're going to prove that McDood's wife never trapped none of 'em, and that he never bought none of 'em from Injuns. Them furs come from Chapeau's!"

As skin after skin was drawn from the frames, all three officers scrutinized the lines in the boards.

Young Hilton looked up. "Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed in an awed tone and turned to the inspector. "I guess you knew what you were talking about when you told me to leave no stone unturned. And when you said I'd learn more about policing in two days with Corporal Kelly than I would in two years of regular duty—I know you were dead right! And here I've been thinking that Corporal Kelly was sort of behind the times!" ● ● ●

Ancient Foo Ching had a strange revenge, even in death

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They went through
the smoking doorway

By
**WALKER
A. TOMPKINS**

The Bushwhack BUDDHA

LUCKY LEW BRADY, marshal of Hangtree Flats, awoke on what was destined to be his last morning on earth with a premonition that the day would bring him trouble. This was the morning

old Foo Ching was to unveil his gold Buddha, and such a heathen procedure in a California mining camp struck Brady as unlucky.

The foreboding was strong enough to cause the hard-bitten Irishman to buckle on an extra sixgun, and to wear his famous rabbit's foot on the outside of his shirt, suspended from his neck by a rawhide thong. The talisman had earned him his nickname, and Brady set great store by it.

Certain it was that Lucky Lew was the only marshal who had survived a full term of office in the Flats. His predecessors had averaged less than six months with a badge.

Bloodshed and lawlessness had been commonplace in Hangtree Flats during the thirty turbulent years of its existence. Its very genesis had been one of violence, starting when Vigilantes chased a claim jumper across the mother lode from Mariposa and hanged him under the live-oak at the foot of Ladder Falls.

The Vigilantes had left the claim jumper swinging in the breeze, soaked by the spray of the falls. A wizened old Chinese, Foo Ching, who had been working up the creek with his gold pan, had halted to dig a grave for the victim.

Foo Ching lifted a young fortune in float ore out of the grave. Within a week a mushroom camp had taken root around his claim.

That had been thirty years ago. Foo Ching had lived to become the patriarch, the "luck" of Hangtree Flats. He claimed to be over a hundred, and nobody in the camp doubted his word. He had been an old, old man when a windjammer from Canton had deposited him in San Francisco during the Big Rush of '49.

Hangtree Flats had seen a lot of change in three decades. The big strikes over in Nevada had made ghost towns out of many a mother lode camp, but the Flats still flourished, with big syndicates operating the quartz mines whose stamp mills deadened the roar of Ladder Falls night and day.

Foo Ching had seen a generation of muckers come and go. His original claim still showed color, although coolies now shoveled pav-dirt into his Long Tom sluice-box. Foo Ching had watched the Flats' Boot Hill outgrow its original tract, and had burned joss sticks for the souls

of ten marshals who had attempted to bring law and order to the camp, only to go down in gunsmoke.

ALL those lawmen had been Foo Ching's friends. So, too, was Lucky Lew Brady, the redhead from Limerick who had quit the mines to pin on a law badge in the town.

And now Foo Ching had decided to cast his gold into an image of Buddha and take it back to the land of his ancestors, where the gold would go to a mission hospital in his native province. Even Foo Ching couldn't live forever, and he wanted his bones to mingle with the dust of Old Cathay.

Lucky Lew Brady had no quarrel with such philanthropic sentiment. But in his opinion it would be tempting fate to lump a lifetime's accumulation of gold into a pot-bellied Oriental idol.

Brady found a sizable crowd of miners, gamblers and saloon riffraff congregated in front of the Syndicate's bullion smelter. The news that old Foo Ching's Buddha was going on view this morning had caused a major sensation in the camp.

The marshal was admitted into the furnace room by Rico Valdez, the Mexican smelter tender. Foo Ching had spent two years carving the original model of wood, from which the mold had been cast. Valdez had poured the statue the day before, liquid gold fused at around two thousand degrees.

Old Foo Ching was on hand. The Celestial looked like an animated mummy. His face was a skull wrapped in dirty parchment, wrinkled as a dried fig. A graying queue was wrapped about his pate. Scanty white mustaches, six inches long, drooped from his lip, and another hank of straggly hair depended from his bony jaw. The old Oriental wore his black ancestral robes in honor of the occasion, his hands protruding from the voluminous sleeves like bundles of dead roots, the nails long and brittle and curving on his knobby talons.

"This is the stupidest notion I ever heard of, Foo Ching!" grumbled the marshal. "Fifty thousand dollars tied up in a single lump, and yez fixin' to carry it all the way to China. Faith and begob, you'll have your skinny throat cut and the Buddha taken away from you before

you get to Sacramento."

Foo Ching's eyes twinkled benevolently through their oblique slits.

"My Buddha will protect this unworthy person," he said in the sibilant monotone which always reminded Brady of wind gusting through a dead thicket. "Me velly safe."

Brady kept his skepticism to himself as he watched Valdez remove the wooden case from the mold and start chipping away the hardbaked clay shell.

Sun rays penciling through the iron-barred windows of the smelter room spotlighted the Chinese idol when the Mexican had loosened the last brittle layers of the mold. It was a thing of beauty, something to dazzle a man's eyes. A paunchy little image of Buddha, slant-eyed and cross-legged, plump fingers laced over a rounding stomach, a benign smile on the golden mouth.

Thirty years' labor was represented by that shimmering statuette. When Foo Ching had drawn his deposits from the Jarrod Brothers' bank the day before, they had tipped the scale at more than two hundred pounds. With gold fetching nineteen dollars the troy ounce, that made this Buddha worth around fifty thousand dollars. And men had been bushwhacked in the diggings for less than fifty cents!

Foo Ching turned away from his masterpiece and shuffled on sandaled feet to the door. Opening it, the ancient motioned to his four coolies waiting outside. They entered, bringing with them a wooden pallet.

A thick-shouldered man in a black fustian coat and beaver hat entered the smelter with the Chinese coolies. He was Wayne Jarrod, one of the twin brothers operating the Bank & Gold Exchange, president of the Vigilantes in the old days, and now mayor and the most prominent citizen of the Flats.

IT WAS Jarrod who had prevailed upon Lew Brady to take over the town marshal's job, and it was he who had kept Foo Ching's gold on deposit through the years.

"A very handsome *objet d'art*," Jarrod complimented, fishing in his brocaded vest for a perfecto. "But hardly a safe item of baggage to carry with you to China, my old friend. You should let me write

you a letter of credit on a Hong Kong bank."

Brady snorted his disapproval as he saw the grunting coolies transfer the gold statue to the pallet, for transport up to Foo Ching's cabin.

"He thinks because he cast his gold into the image of his god, that he'll be safe from harm!" sputtered the marshal. "Beggorra, he'll be bushwhack bait from the minute he pulls out of the diggin's! But yez can't argue with the old haythen."

Foo Ching gestured with a scrawny arm and his pig-tailed coolies hoisted the pallet to their shoulders, the sturdy poles sagging under the weight of the image.

"My son comes from San Francisco today," purred the aged Chinese, smiling toothlessly. "Lee Ching is young and stlong and velly brave. He will see me safe on the ship which will take me to the land of my forefathers."

Jarrod and the marshal exchanged resigned glances as the coolies staggered out of the furnace room with their burden. Lucky Lew Brady loosened his six-guns in holsters and stepped out into the din of the stamp mills, clearing a path in the throng which pressed around for a glimpse of the fabulous object.

Foo Ching shuffled off up the street, the coolies at his heels. Brady accompanied the Chinese up the steep trail which led to Foo Ching's log cabin on the hillside overlooking the town. He had no fear of anyone attacking Foo Ching in daylight, because the very weight of the Buddha would discourage any attempt at a robbery. But he was taking no chances.

The coolies transferred their burden to the little joss niche which Foo Ching had carved in the dugout earthen wall which formed the rear of his shack. To them, the golden statue was a sacred thing, the image of a deity which their honorable ancestors had worshiped for thousands of years.

After the coolies had returned to their labors on Foo Ching's claim, down where the skeleton of the original old hangtree cast its shadowy pattern over the creek bed, Lucky Lew Brady seated himself on a bench by Foo Ching's door.

"The stagecoach pulls in from Mariposa at sundown," he answered the Chinese's unspoken question. "Your son Lee will be aboard. I don't aim to budge from

this cabin till he's here to watch after yez and your dommed Chinee statue, understand?"

Foo Ching bowed and voiced his gratitude for Brady's anxiety over his welfare. Hangtree Flats had never seen the patriarch's heir, and of all the residents of the boom camp, Brady alone knew his story.

Lee Ching was not the real son of the old Chinese, for the ancient had never married. Lee's parents had died of cholera back in China, and Foo Ching had adopted the orphan baby as his own and brought him to California.

Lee had grown up in San Francisco's Chinatown. He had become a policeman there. Past thirty now, he had never succumbed to the lure of gold which had brought most men of his age up into the mother lode. Foo Ching visited his son twice a year, and always brought back glowing tales of the respect which Lee Ching commanded in the metropolis by the Golden Gate.

But Lee Ching would reach Hangtree Flats tonight. On the morrow he would take his venerable foster-father back to civilization. Foo Ching, and the image of Buddha which represented his labors of three decades. Lee Ching would see his foster-parent safely aboard a steam packet that would return him and his golden Buddha to the Asiatic hills that had given him birth more than a century before.

THE mid-weekly stagecoach from Mari-
posa failed to arrive in Hangtree Flats that night, but a Wells-Fargo Express rider reached the camp with the report that the stage had broken down on the Sugar Pine grade and would be delayed until morning.

The Flats were not doomed to an uneventful evening, however.

Shortly before midnight, the town's fire bell clanged above the incessant roar of the stamp mills, emptying the saloons and honkytonks and jamming the streets with excited throngs.

All eyes were drawn to the conflagration on the hillside above Ladder Falls. Flames were shooting skyward above the crowns of the sugar pines, lighting the canyon with a malevolent red glow far beyond the tarpaper roofs of the town.

"It's Foo Ching's place!"

"The Chinee's shack—and blazing like a torch!"

The horse-drawn fire engine that was the Flats' community pride went rocketing up the steep slope to Foo Ching's cabin, accompanied by the Volunteer Brigade in their shiny red hats.

But no power on earth could save the blazing shack of the boom camp's founder. Even before men could man the pumps and play water on the flames from the leathern hoses, the shake roof tumbled in and the pitch in the dried log walls made an inferno to envelope the ruins.

Wayne Jarrod, as chief of the fire brigade, was on hand to direct the fire-fighting. Ignoring the doomed cabin, Jarrod ordered his firemen to chop down trees on the surrounding slope to obviate the threat of a forest fire which might sweep for miles across the drought-parched California timberland.

Men slaved in shifts to pump water from the creek, playing their spouting nozzles on the charred embers of Foo Ching's shack. It was nearly dawn before the soot-blackened brigadeers had brought the menace under control.

Not until then did the town begin to ask questions. Where was Foo Ching? And why was Marshal Lew Brady missing? Brady was always on hand at fires, both in his rôle as a lawman and as assistant chief of the Volunteer Brigade.

And what of Foo Ching's golden Buddha? It was undoubtedly inside the smoldering ruins. Rico Valdez, the bullion smelter boss, reassured everyone that the fire could not damage the statue. It would take much hotter temperatures to fuse gold. Even if it did melt, the precious metal could be salvaged from the ashes.

Daylight was breaking over the Sierra Nevada summit when Wayne Jarrod led an exploring party through the smoking doorway of Foo Ching's cabin, their faces protected by wet bandages from the clouding steam and glowing charcoal.

They found two charred human forms in the ruins. Lucky Lew Brady lay on the puncheon floor near the door, identifiable only by the fire-tarnished badge he had worn.

The seared bones of Foo Ching were found crumpled in a kneeling position in front of the blackened niche in the earthen wall which had been his joss. In death,

Foo Ching still hugged a metallic object in his arms, close to his charred body.

But it was not the golden Buddha. It was merely the old iron prospecting pan with which Foo Ching had searched the California creek beds for gold thirty-odd years before.

The Buddha? It was missing from its niche. The stunning fact was corroborated by the scores of awe-struck miners who braved the heat of the ruins.

The shocking truth sped through the boom camp to outrage the most hardened listener. Someone had murdered Lucky Lew Brady and Foo Ching, stolen a two-hundred-pound gold statue, spilled a keg of whale oil over the cabin and fired it to cover up their fiendish crime.

But that was absurd. No lone killer could get away with such ponderous loot. The Buddha must be somewhere in the ruins.

A big crowd still lingered around the smoking embers on the hillside when the delayed stagecoach from Mariposa pulled in at ten o'clock. The corpses were left undisturbed, under express orders of Mayor Wayne Jarrod. Rico Valdez had been sworn in as a special deputy and left at the cabin site with his rifle, to keep looters away.

JARROD was on hand to meet the stage. As Foo Ching's banker, he was the logical man to break the news of the tragedy to young Lee Ching, heir of the murdered Chinese.

But no Chinese alighted from the Concord. Ike Jacobsen, the venerable Jehu who had toiled the Mariposa stage for twenty years was positive that no Asiatic passenger had been aboard when the stage broke down twenty miles out of Mariposa. Lee Ching had missed the connection from Sacramento, that was all.

The town scanned Jacobsen's passengers. They were a wheelwright returning to the Flats, a spinster who was going to teach school that winter, a sky-pilot scheduled to reopen the Baptist Church, and a lean stranger in a flat-crowned beaver with twin sixguns buckled at his flanks, who did not state his reasons for being aboard the stagecoach. His was a common breed around the gold camps.

The banker approached the sky-pilot and removed his hat.

"We haven't got a clergyman anywhere in the diggings," he said apologetically. "I hate to ask you, Reverend, but you'll have to officiate at a couple of funerals this afternoon. A Chinese over a hundred years old, and our late lamented marshal. Both of them were murdered last night."

The whole town turned out for the funeral that afternoon, when the bodies of Foo Ching and Lucky Lew Brady were consigned to adjoining graves in Boot Hill down the river.

When the sky-pilot had finished a requiem at the graveside, the bulk of the population returned to their favorite bar-rooms to discuss the tragedy in muted tones.

Creeping into the conversation were inevitable references to the missing Buddha which was known to have been in Foo Ching's cabin before the fire. No trace of the gold statue had been found in the ashes, after Jarrod and Valdez had made a painstaking search.

Wayne Jarrod was seated in his office at the Gold Exchange Bank when the tall stranger whom Jarrod recognized as one of the passengers on that morning's stage entered.

"I understand you're the kingpin of these diggings, Mr. Jarrod," the stranger said. "The word is going the rounds that the marshal's job is open in this camp."

Jarrod nodded slowly, sizing up the stranger. He saw a huskily built man well over six feet, yellow-haired and wind-bronzed, with a pair of penetrating blue eyes and slim, nervous hands that were hooked in the cartridge belts looping his midriff. Off-hand, Jarrod estimated the stranger to be crowding thirty.

"You heard correct," Jarrod admitted. "Hangtree Flats has been notorious as a—as an unhealthy spot for lawmen, stranger. I have my doubts of finding anyone around here with the nerve to fill Lew Brady's shoes."

The stranger smiled without mirth.

"I'm applying for the job, Mr. Jarrod."

The banker rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"What are your qualifications?" he asked.

The stranger tapped his gun-butts.

"A gunslick, eh?" the banker said. "Well, that's the main thing a marshal needs in this ruckus-raisin' camp. Er—I

didn't catch your name?"

The stranger shrugged.

"I've been called various names," he said. "You can call me Frisco. And I might add I'm not on the dodge, if that matters to you up here."

Jarrold hesitated. Then he pulled open a drawer to take out a fire-blackened metal star on which the single word "MARSHAL" was engraved.

"Consider yourself sworn in, Frisco," the banker said, pinning the emblem on the stranger's shirt. "And if you're looking for a job to start out on, you might drag in the killer who bushwhacked your predecessor last night."

FRISCO turned on his heel and stalked to the door. Hand on knob, he turned to bend a hard stare at the boom-camp mayor.

"That is exactly what I intend to do, Mr. Jarrod," he said cryptically.

Leaving the Gold Exchange, Frisco headed down the main street toward Ladder Falls. Curious glances followed him, as saloon porch loafers read the significance of Lucky Lew Brady's tin star on this stranger's chest.

Before Frisco had reached the edge of town, the news was already flashing along the grapevine that Hangtree Flats had a new marshal.

Frisco had attended the double funeral down the river that afternoon. He had visited the fire-gutted cabin, had already picked up the gist of the golden Buddha story from the crowds. He was not unaware of the fact that marshals didn't live long in the Flats.

He found Rico Valdez still guarding the smoking ruins of the cabin where the old Chinese had lived. Foo Ching's coolies were huddled together near the cabin, brooding together in their common grief.

"Ah, Señor Fresco!" greeted Valdez. "You come back so soon?"

Frisco nodded. He had spent an hour poking through the charred wreckage, under Valdez's watchful eye. It was from Valdez that he had learned the identity of the man empowered to appoint him Marshal of Hangtree Flats.

"Yeah. I'm back. And I'm your new boss."

The deputy's black eyes flashed approvingly as he saw Brady's badge.

"*Sto bueno*, Señor Fresco. I 'ope you weel be more lucky than Señor Brady or the others, *si*. *Diablo!* I would not be the marshal of thees *maldito* camp for all the gold in California."

Frisco did not appear to have heard Valdez's gloomy pronouncement.

"You wouldn't let me take away Foo Ching's prospecting pan when I was here an hour ago," the new marshal said, without rancor. "But I reckon I got the official right to have it now."

Valdez nodded, shrugging.

"Eet was Señor Jarrod's orders that nothing be taken away from thees *casa*," he explained. "But now you are the marshal, *es seguro*—help yourself, Señor Fresco!"

Frisco ducked under the smoldering lintel of Foo Ching's door and waded through ankle-deep ashes to the earthen wall at the far end of the debris-littered room.

He stood a few moments in thought, staring at the gouged-out niche which had been the joss of the old Chinese. The niche from which Foo Ching's golden Buddha had been stolen.

Then he stooped to pick up the soot-blackened iron pan which the coroner had removed from Foo Ching's embrace.

With a sleeve, Frisco wiped soot off the inner surface of the pan, accentuating the series of scratches where fresh metal showed. Some sharp instrument had etched those scratches in the rusty utensil, and recently.

Tucking the gold pan under his arm, Frisco walked out of the ruins, motioning for Rico Valdez to accompany him.

Scowling curiously, the Mexican smelter boss followed Frisco over to the shade of the fire-shriveled manzanita where Foo Ching's coolies were hunkered, their inscrutable faces masking their inner grief in the manner of their race.

The newly appointed marshal of Hangtree Flats spoke to the coolies in a tongue which fell strange on Valdez's ear.

Instantly, the immobile Oriental faces became animated. The coolies leaped to their feet, crowding around Frisco as the marshal pointed to the fresh scratches on the interior surface of the prospecting pan.

Their expressions hardened and they began jabbering excitedly in Chinese. If

Frisco comprehended their jargon, he gave no sign.

Frisco turned to Valdez.

"Come with me," he ordered. "You're still my deputy. We got work to do."

VALDEZ flung his grimy serape over one shoulder, cradled his Winchester under one arm, and strode off down the slope behind the marshal. The four coolies, still chattering excitedly, padded in their wake.

Heading down the main street, his face grim and inflexible in the sunset glare, Frisco turned in under the wooden awning of the Jarrod Brothers' Bank and Gold Exchange.

In response to the marshal's knock, Wayne Jarrod came to the door.

"Marshal Frisco!" greeted the banker, stepping back. "Come in. I want you to meet my brother Jode. Jode, this is Frisco, the salty new marshal I hired this afternoon."

Frisco nodded in recognition of his introduction. Jode Jarrod was a duplicate of his twin, but heavier and with a gambler's pallor on his beefy-jowled face. Like Wayne, he wore a swallow-tail coat and a high beaver hat. Judging from the litter of papers on the desk, the brothers had been going over their business affairs.

"Mr. Jarrod, I've dug up a few facts about that bushwhacking last night," Frisco said, as Valdez and the quartette of coolies ranged themselves along the wall at his back. "You interested?"

The Jarrod brothers exchanged surprised glances. Then Wayne gestured toward a chair and shoved out a box of Cuban perfectos, both of which Frisco ignored.

"You're a fast worker, if you really have found any clues in that ash heap." Wayne Jarrod chuckled, seating himself behind the big desk alongside his brother. "That's the kind of marshal we need here in the Flats. Speak your piece, Frisco."

Frisco set Foo Ching's soot-blackened prospecting pan carefully on the chair.

"You went to the funeral this afternoon," Frisco began, his eyes boring into Wayne Jarrod's face. "It didn't take a detective to figure out that Marshal Lew Brady was dead before the fire broke out. There was a bullet-hole smack in the middle of his forehead."

Wayne Jarrod's eyes narrowed as he nodded agreement.

"Yes, it's common knowledge that Brady had been shot to death," the banker said. "No one heard the gunshot over the noise of the stamp mills. You'll have to do better than that, Frisco."

The marshal's lips curled in a bleak grin.

"Now take the old Chinese, Foo Ching. I had a look-see when I passed his coffin, but I saw no signs of a wound. He'd been shot in the chest or stomach, most likely."

Wayne Jarrod shrugged. "The coroner put down his death as due to fire," the banker said. "That, of course, might have been a convenient jumping to conclusions."

Frisco picked up the gold pan and turned it over in his hands.

"The marshal," he went on, "was guarding Foo Ching's cabin. Yet he opened the door when the killer showed up, which is proof that he knew and trusted the man who shot him at point-blank range."

The Jarrods made no comment.

"Foo Ching, the way I size it up, was shot, but didn't die instantly," Frisco continued. "The killers—at least two of them—carried out the gold statue of Buddha. Then they emptied Foo Ching's keg of lamp oil around the place and set it afire. But I've got proof that Foo Ching lived long enough to take a knife and scratch a message on the inside of this gold pan he was found hugging against him."

Frisco turned to the coolies. One of them stepped forward, taking the pan from the marshal's hands.

"If I read Foo Ching's message, you'd think I was faking, Jarrod," Frisco said. "So I brought along Foo Ching's workmen to translate it for you. It's in Cantonese hieroglyphics."

The Jarrod brothers squirmed in their chairs as the coolie cleared his throat and started chanting in his nasal sing-song the Chinese characters etched on the rusty, fire-blackened pan:

"The evil twin brothers have killed my old friend and left me to die in the ashes of my humble abode. But the holy joss which they took away holds a curse for the evil-doers and—"

IT was Jode Jarrod whose nerve snapped at that moment. The fat gambler-bank-

er leaped to his feet with a hoarse shriek. "No—no!" he bawled. "The whole idea was—"

With a snarled oath, Wayne Jarrod stabbed a hand under his lapel and brought it out with a stubby-barreled deringer. Before he could squeeze trigger, twin Dragoon .45s leaped from Frisco's holsters and converging slugs ripped into the banker's chest.

Jode Jarrod pawed his arms toward the ceiling as he saw Rico Valdez swing his Winchester to cover him. He backed away as his brother's body thumped face-down across the table.

"It was Wayne's idea!" cried the gambler. "He talked me into helping steal Foo Ching's statue and lugging it down here to his vault. I didn't do the shooting, Marshal. Wayne aimed to melt the Buddha down and dispose of it with our bullion."

The new marshal of Hangtree Flats holstered his smoking Colts and motioned toward the big safe behind Jarrod.

"Open up that vault, Jarrod. I got here too late to see my father. The best I can

do for him is ship his remains back to China like he wanted. But I've got a hankering to see that bushwhack Buddha of his. He aimed to donate it to the Canton mission where I was born."

Jode Jarrod, knowing full well what his fate would be at the hands of a miners' court when Frisco turned in the law badge he had worn, lurched over to the big safe. His palsied fingers spun the combination dial. Then, in the act of swinging open the vault door, the implication of the marshal's words penetrated his mind.

"Your—father!" he gasped. "Then—then you—"

Frisco nodded. "I'm Lee Ching. My parents were missionaries. When they died Foo Ching adopted me and brought me back to the land of my own people. Foo Ching was the only dad I ever knew."

The vault door swung open. The day's last expiring sun ray lanced into the open safe, reflecting the benign smile on the Buddha's furbished lips. It seemed to be smiling because its destiny would be fulfilled, even as Foo Ching had prophesied before he went to join his ancestors.

BUTTE'S COLORFUL CABBIE



OF ALL the colorful characters who thronged the streets of early-day Butte, Montana, none was more famous than "Fat Jack" Jones, Butte's first hack driver.

Despite his nickname, Fat Jack was anything but fat. As a matter of fact, he resembled a hungry buzzard more than anything human. Solemn and gaunt, he habitually made his rounds clad in black trousers, a black stove pipe hat, and a moth-eaten buffalo-skin overcoat. Completing the ensemble was a rusty gray goatee.

It was Fat Jack's boast that his horse-drawn cab had transported more celebrities than had been carried by any other hack in the United States—a claim no one ever contested. Among his fares had been Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, the kings of both Belgium and Denmark, John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, Jim Jeffries, Bob Fitzsimmons and Sarah Bernhardt.

In Butte's galaxy of Fat Jack legends, a prime favorite is the story of the \$2000 cab fare. Despite the fact that he made good money with his hack, the old jehu had an overpowering weakness for faro, and generally was broke. Once, in urgent need of \$2000, he borrowed the sum from his friend, Jim Murray, posting no collateral but his simple note.

Years passed. Fat Jack made no payment on the loan. Meanwhile, Murray became a mining magnate and a millionaire. Returning to Butte after an extended absence, Murray engaged Jack's decrepit cab.

Upon alighting from the vehicle, he tendered the \$2000 note as payment for the ride.

With palsied fingers the old man accepted the slip of paper—so ancient it had become brittle and yellow. After contemplating it a moment, he solemnly handed it back. "Nice of ye, Jim," he drawled. "But me, I don't cotton to doing business that way! If I didn't repay that loan I'd never be able to look myself in the eye again. No! You keep the note, and just pay me what you owe me for the ride—fifty cents."

Needless to say, when Fat Jack went to his final reward, the note remained unpaid.

The DISTANT GUNS

A Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



Bill's right fist sledged the man
on the jaw

I

THE guns of Gettysburg were silent, but their echoes had run the width of the continent to the Pacific, there to die among the timbered hills. Some who heard gave thanks. Many were indifferent. And there was a militant minority that, despite defeat, went on with treasonable plotting. It was this scheming that brought Bill Smith, Federal agent, back to Oregon.

It was a wet day, typical of the country of Williamette Valley Falls. Bill sat hunched forward in his seat, staring at the rain-lanced countryside as the stage rolled and pitched. Then his long-jawed face broke into a smile of satisfaction as

the first scattered houses came into view. It had been a long wearying trip from Portland to Salem.

The usual curious crowd waited on the plank sidewalk in front of the stage office. Bill, stepping down, smiled again. Rain and mud held no terror for an Oregonian. He went into the office and held out his hands to the fire, wondering if he would make a mistake if he went directly to the adjutant general. As far as he knew he had not aroused suspicion, but he couldn't be sure, and a mistake would be fatal.

It was then that he raised his eyes and saw the girl. If Bill Smith lived to be a million years old, he would never forget that moment. It wasn't enough to say that she was pretty. She was, Bill thought startlingly pretty. On this day when most women were suddenly bedraggled, she was as fresh as a newly starched cuff.

Her black hair set off her bright-

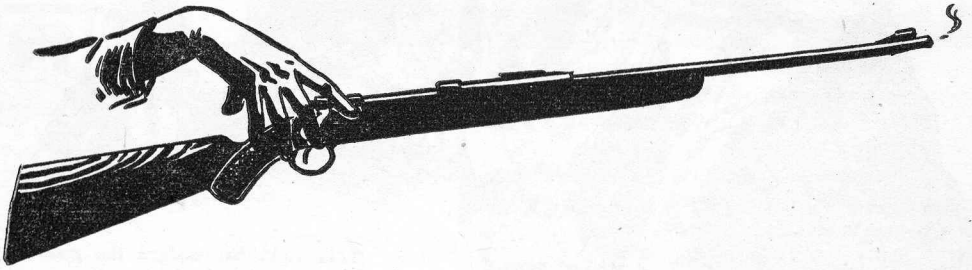
still standing there when two men came out of a side room.

"If we don't strike now, we're fools," one of them was saying bitterly. "There will never be a better time."

"Keep your tone down, Ira." That speaker was a fat man with round red-veined cheeks. His eyes involuntarily turned toward the door in front of him. "Reed doesn't like that kind of talk."

"I don't give a damn what Reed likes or don't like!" the other man said, his voice louder than before. "Pat, you can't keep straddling the fence. The South is our natural ally. If we strike now, we can get help. Why, we could make the Pacific Republic a going concern within a matter of weeks!"

The two men were standing directly in front of Adjutant General Reed's office. Bill was certain of that from the way the fat man kept looking at the door. An idea



cheeked face in sharp contrast. For a short moment her eager blue eyes were locked with his gray ones. Then she dropped her gaze, her lingering smile warming him.

Bill left the stage office, inwardly disturbed and mentally cursing himself for it. Too much depended on his mission here for him to be distracted by a pretty woman. Besides, he knew from experience that all Copperhead spies were not men.

He found a restaurant and had dinner. Pulling his collar up around his neck, he turned toward the statehouse, half expecting to see the girl materialize out of the rain.

REACHING the statehouse, he looked back and saw that he had not been followed. He stepped inside and stood motionless for a moment, feeling the warmth wash around him as he wondered where he'd find the adjutant general. He was

slapped at Bill, and he acted upon it immediately, not certain at the moment whether it was a fool play or a stroke of genius.

"I'm no traitor," the fatman said. "I was a Breckinridge man in 'Sixty, but I was on the losing side. I'll make the best of it."

"You were not necessarily on the losing side, my friend," Bill called, and strode toward him. "The war is not over, and you're a long ways from the sound of guns. Much of what you hear is prejudiced."

Both men wheeled to face him, the fat one obviously worried, the other raking him with sharp black eyes.

"Who are you?" the fat man asked uneasily.

"Bill Smith. From Missouri."

"I'm Pat Malone." The fat man held out a moist hand. "Welcome to Oregon, Mr. Smith." He motioned to the dark-eyed man. "Meet Mr. Logan."

Bill judged Malone to be one of the dozens of disgruntled politicians who had lost

their jobs when the Lincoln administration had come into office more than two years ago. Ira Logan, bald-headed and sharp-nosed, was something else. He extended a callused hand and gave the secret grip. When Bill returned it, the tension of his thin-lipped mouth was relaxed by a smile.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Smith," he said amiably. "I'm afraid your trip from Portland was not pleasant."

"Slow and muddy and uncomfortable," Bill returned irritably. "Before that I spent eighty hours on the *Western Belle*. Rough all the way from 'Frisco."

"I'll see you later," Logan said. "Pat, we'll expect you at the Forks tomorrow."

Logan wheeled out into the rain.

Bill, his voice loud, said, "I should apologize for breaking into your conversation, Malone, but I wanted to put you straight on a matter of the utmost importance.

list, and what'd I get? A musket ball that still gives me plenty of trouble. It's time somebody came back and told the truth."

"Pat, I want you in my office," Reed snapped. He drew a pistol from inside his coat and lined it on Bill. "You make one wrong move, my friend, and I'll save hanging money."

BILL demanded in feigned indignation, "What kind of a country is this? Isn't there such a thing any more as freedom of speech?"

"It's something more than freedom of speech when you call the Stars and Stripes a Yankee rag," Reed nodded at the door. "Move along."

"The boy has done nothing," Malone tried to defend.

"Shut up, if you don't want to go to jail with him," Reed snapped. "The sentiment this man just expressed is treason

Bill Smith, Federal Agent, Had a Strange Mission—to Head Westward and Hold Oregon True to the Union

Don't think that the war is lost because Lee retired into Virginia after Gettysburg. He'll be back in the spring, and the minute he crosses the Potomac, there will be an uprising in the Middle West that will tear the vitals out of the north! Then, Mr. Malone, you Breckinridge men will be back in the saddle, and the Yankee rag will come down to stay."

"That's treasonable talk, Mr. Smith," Malone backed away. "I—"

The door Malone had been watching was slammed open. A man shouted, "Treasonable talk, Malone? That's hanging talk!"

"So I said, General Reed," Malone gulped. "Just what I said."

"Who are you?" Reed demanded, eyes stabbing Bill.

"I'm Bill Smith. You don't need to talk to me about treasonable talk. I lived in Oregon until I was sucked in by all the big gab in 'Sixty-one. I went East to en-

and all the grounds I need for arrest."

Bill moved toward the door. When Malone disappeared into Reed's office, he said softly, "I want to see you alone, General."

Reed pushed the door open, acting as if he hadn't heard, and called, "Calkins, lock this man up. Let him have a bullet if he gets out of hand." He gave Bill a push that sent him in a rolling fall down the steps to splash into a puddle on the ground. "You'd better think twice before you start talking in this state about the Yankee rag!" he bellowed, and slammed the door.

Reed had been harsher than he'd needed to be. Anger burned through Bill Smith's veins. He spat out a mouthful of dirty water as he regained his feet, and shook a fist at the door.

"We'll see who's making hanging talk before we're done!" he cried.

Calkins, the policeman, knocked him into the puddle again.

"I ought to shoot you and be done with it," he raged. "I've got a boy with Tom Cornelius' Rough Riders. I ain't of a mind to listen to any more out of you."

Bill struggled out of the puddle a second time. Thoroughly wet now, he wiped the water and mud out of his eyes and, under Calkins' gun, swung down the street. Then he saw what was probably the cause of Reed's harsh treatment. The sharp-nosed man, Ira Logan, was watching from the shelter of a fir tree across the street.

There was no heat in the jail into which Calkins threw Bill Smith. He strode the length of the cell and back time after time, swinging his hands to keep them warm. He was wet and muddy and getting hungry again, and his temper was whetted razor-sharp.

The jailer finally brought his supper—cold coffee, bread, and a boiled potato. There had been days when he'd eaten less before he'd been discharged from the army, but he didn't think he'd ever been wetter or more uncomfortable.

It was nearly midnight before the adjutant general came. He talked to the jailer for a moment, then came back to the cell.

"All right," he said loudly. "If you want out, you can sing loud and pretty."

"Go to hell!" Bill roared. Lowering his voice, he said, "I'd like to borrow your knife."

Reed slipped his knife through the bars. Bill quickly slit the lining of his coat, pulled out a sheet of folded paper and handed it and the knife to Reed. "My identification, sir. I have no specific orders, except to report to you."

Reed nodded and glanced at the sheet. "I thought you were the man I've been looking for, but I didn't expect you to make your appearance in the manner you did."

"I jumped in with both feet." Bill grinned wryly. "Seemed like a good way to impress Logan and to see you without creating suspicion."

"It was. Logan is one of the top men in the Knights of the Golden Circle, and I have no doubt you impressed him."

"And Malone is a politician, wondering which way to jump?"

"That's it. Logan needs him, but Malone's afraid to join up." Reed frowned. "You'll have to stay here tonight. I'll get you out in the morning."

Staring at him in the thin light, Bill saw that the official did not completely trust him. "What are my orders?" he asked.

"Nothing definite, except that tomorrow you'll go to the forks of the Santiam." Reed scratched a cheek thoughtfully. "You knew Senator Baker?"

"I was in his command when he fell at Balls Bluff."

"Is this your first mission of this nature?"

BILL thought of saying that he'd been successful in learning many of the Circle's secrets, but decided against it. "No. I've been behind the lines in Missouri and Arkansas," he said, instead. "I know what I'm into, sir, and I am aware of the importance of keeping the Copperheads under control."

"If I didn't have some spies," Reed said darkly, "I'd be dead now and Fort Vancouver would have been attacked. I have been informed that the Knights expect a Confederate agent. You will stay at a roadside inn operated by a young woman named Sally Biddle. You'll have to think of your own excuse for remaining. Sooner or later all the important Copperheads in Oregon will show up at Biddle's, largely, I think, to confer with Logan."

"Will I find one of your spies at the Forks?"

"You may." Reed scratched a cheek, uncertainty mirrored on his face. "As a matter of fact, I don't know the identity of the spy who operates in that neighborhood. He's entirely unofficial. He mails his messages in Albany, but he knows a good deal of the Circle's plans." Reed cleared his throat. "After you leave Salem in the morning, Smith, you'll have no help."

"I don't expect help, sir."

"You're certain you aren't suspected?"

"I met General Summer secretly in San Francisco and took the *Western Belle* the next day. I was the only passenger on the stage. I have no reason to think I have come under their observation."

"Good. What orders were you given before you came West?"

"Only to prevent any overt act which would take Oregon out of the Union."

"I'll see you in the morning." Reed nodded and walked out.

Bill began pacing the floor again and swinging his arms. Reed could have told

him more. He was as certain of that as he was certain of the distrust that the adjutant general had for him.

He couldn't blame Reed. The man couldn't be sure he hadn't killed the real Bill Smith and stolen his credentials. Months in the Missouri hills had taught Bill that in this grim game you trusted no one, and in return you were mistrusted by everyone. A bullet was the reward for failure. The rules didn't change on the other side of the Rockies.

The rain was coming down harder now. Bill was aware of the increased tempo by the rush of water from the roof. The wind had risen. A bucket was blown off somebody's porch and clattered down the walk. Horses slashed through the pools in the street.

It was, Bill thought, a good night to stay inside. Even a cold jail was better than being out in the storm. Then, hard on that thought, he heard Ira Logan's voice.

"Get back there and unlock that cell! I'm taking your prisoner."

II

CURSING bitterly, the reluctant jailer tramped down the hall, jangling a ring of keys. Fitting a key into the lock, he turned it and swung the door open. Logan stood a step behind him, face masked by a black cloth, dragoon pistol in his hand.

When the door opened, he lifted the gun and brought the barrel in a vicious downsweep across the jailer's head. It was unnecessary, and Bill, hardened by the cruelties of war as he was, was shocked by the brutality of it.

"Come on, Smith," Logan rolled the jailer's body inside the cell and locked the door. "That'll hold him till morning, and we'll be a long way from here by then."

Bill paused in the office to pick up and holster the guns Calkins had taken from him, and to pocket his knife and money. Logan waited impatiently by the door.

"Reed and Calkins were a little rough on you," he said.

"There'll be another day," Bill said grimly, and followed Logan into the rain.

Three horses were being held by a slim figure who stood with shoulders hunched, back to the rain, face covered by a muffler. Mounting, they circled the business part of town and headed south, keeping to

as fast a pace as the condition of the road allowed. There was no talk, for the wind that came quartering from the southwest would have blown their words out of their mouths.

They were in the timber at last and darkness was complete around them. The rain stopped before they had ridden a mile, but the wind, rich with the moldy smell of fall, increased until it was close to a gale. Bill heard the riflelike snap of limbs breaking, the earth-shaking roar as a giant fir was torn out by the roots and hurled to the ground.

They rode through the long hours, downgrade and up, and then gray light touched the damp earth, and Bill could see the road twisting ahead of them. From the minute he had left Salem, he had been pondering the cause of this jail break, and could find but one explanation. Ira Logan had mistaken him for the Confederate agent the Copperheads expected.

It was full daylight when they reached the Santiam, sullen and high after the rain. Bill, looking sideward at the slim figure who had held the horses, saw now that the rider was not a boy. It was the blue-eyed girl who had so disturbed him in the stage office! He stared, held silent by surprise as they rode onto the ferry seeking an explanation for the girl's presence, and finding none.

Logan chuckled. "I wondered when you'd discover who our traveling companion was. Sally, meet Bill Smith. I'll tell you now, Smith, that Sally Biddle is more man than most of our members. Too bad we can't make her our brother."

Sally extended her hand and gave Bill a firm shake. "I thought I knew who you were when I saw you in the stage station, Mr. Smith."

"Thanks for what you and Logan did," he murmured. "I don't know where we're going, but anything'll be better than the jail cell I left."

"We're going to my place up the river," Sally told him. "And I don't agree with Ira that it's too bad you can't make me your brother. I find there is some advantage in my position."

Logan laughed. "I'm warning you, Smith. She'll ferret your last secret out of you."

They were across the river then, and Logan lingered beside the ferryman. "You

haven't brought anybody across, Mike," he said meaningly. "Remember that. Some of Reed's men may be along."

"I understand, Ira," the ferryman said, and lifted a hand in salute.

"The faithful are everywhere," Sally murmured. "Your friend, the adjutant general, would have nightmares if he knew."

"My friend?" Bill snorted. "After him pitching me into a mud-hole?"

Across the river, they rode upstream, and near noon came to a clearing with a two-story log house centering it, a barn and outbuildings scattered between the house and the timber. The river curled along the north side of the clearing, the sound of it an ominous grumble, the naked willows along the bank bowing with the unceasing rush of the current.

"We'll find some dry clothes for you, Mr. Smith," Sally said as they reined up.

AN HOUR later Bill sat with his feet extended toward the fireplace, eyes closed, the warmth and dry clothes and the satisfaction of a full stomach bringing him to a state of drowsy comfort. He opened his eyes when Logan came in.

"I could sleep for a week," he muttered, but Logan reminded, "A man with your job can't afford to sleep."

"How did you happen to break me out?" Bill saw surprise in the Copperhead leader's eyes and knew he'd made a mistake. "I mean, the job made a bad risk for you."

Logan knelt at the fireplace and, picking up a flaming splinter, lighted his cigar. Rising, he stood with an elbow on the mantel, black eyes narrowed and touched by suspicion.

"You didn't think I'd leave you there, did you?"

"I hoped not, but we're playing for high stakes, and some of the cards we hold are mighty poor." Bill rose. "Logan, I've met with a good many of our people in Missouri and California. Some, like you, will go down the line the same as any soldier in battle. With most, it's a case of dollars and cents. I'll guess that in a showdown you can't count on more than ten per cent of your men."

"That's right," Logan said sourly. "How many guns came north on the *Western Belle*?"

Bill began feeling in his pockets for his

pipe. It was touch and go. He didn't know that any guns had come north. If Logan knew, and was making this a test question, he was in trouble.

"Hang it, Logan, what did I do with my pipe?"

"I asked how many guns came north!" Logan snapped.

"Oh! Sorry. Guess I left my pipe in my clothes." He'd bull it through and hope Logan didn't know. "One thousand."

"More than I expected." Logan pulled thoughtfully on his cigar. "If I had one good man for every gun, I'd have Fort Vancouver within a week. With the cannons and shot and shell I'd have then, I'd take the Northwest."

Bill masked his relief. "Our job is to take Oregon out. I suppose you'd like to see it in the Confederacy."

"No," Logan said quickly. "For my part, I want none of the South. We'll have a Pacific Republic governed by men who live here. We cooperate with the South only because the North is a mutual enemy."

This, then, was the line to follow. Nodding, Bill said, "Those are my sentiments, Logan."

"California will go out when we do." Logan fingered the ash from his cigar. "The trouble is we don't have the thousand men."

"Ten good men working together are worth fifty working separately," Bill said.

"That's the reason for your coming, isn't it?" Logan asked. "To get us to work with our Eastern brothers?"

Bill nodded, knowing he was slipping out on thin ice again. He changed the subject. "When do you meet?"

"Tonight. I've sent out word."

"How many men?"

"Fifty."

"How many castles in the state?"

"Eight, I believe." Logan spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "Another illustration of the folly of division. I can't get cooperation from some of the others. You can help."

"Some of the castles are larger than yours?"

Logan nodded. "We have the thousand men in the state, and more, but getting the Rogue River boys to march from Jacksonville to Fort Vancouver isn't easy. Damn it, Smith, you've got to set these

men on fire! One victory would bring volunteers flocking to our flag by the hundreds."

"Like your fat friend, Malone?"

"That's right," Logan said dourly, throwing his cigar into the fireplace. "He'll be here this evening. Maybe you can win him over. I can't."

"Ira," Sally said, coming in from the dining room. "I'd like for you to meet Captain Cole Jarvis, recently of Morgan's cavalry." A tall, straight-backed man was beside her. She motioned to Bill. "And Mr. Smith, another brother who recently arrived from the East."

FOR a moment none of them stirred. Bill heard Logan's breathing. He held his own. He felt Jarvis's piercing brown eyes on him. He thought, This is the man the Copperheads have been expecting.

Bill took a step away from Logan, hands moving downward toward his guns. Then panic momentarily paralyzed him. Not expecting trouble and afraid he would arouse suspicion, he had left his guns in the room where he had changed clothes!

"I came up from Jacksonville," Jarvis said. "I spent last night with the Albany brothers. I've heard about you and your excellent work, Logan. I've heard about Miss Biddle." He lined a forefinger on Bill. "I have not heard about this man, and I hope you have not talked plainly to him. I suspect him of being a Federal agent!"

Here it was, straight out and wicked. Bill Smith could smash a fist into the Rebel captain's face. Or he could bluff. In an instant decision he decided to bluff.

"Jarvis," he said grimly, "I have the same reason to suspect you. Logan, this is why you don't get the cooperation you need. We're playing tag with the hangman. Jarvis may be the fellow with the rope."

"I'll not listen to that talk!" Jarvis's hand dipped to gun butt.

"None of that," Logan said testily. "Where did you find this man, Sally?"

"He rode in late last night from Albany, and Martha put him up. He just now came downstairs."

"That's right," Jarvis said defiantly. "I haven't slept much for a week, and I didn't hear you come in." He stroked his drooping mustache, bold gaze on Logan. "I have

special orders for Richmond. I expect your cooperation."

"What are your plans?" Logan asked.

"I want to talk to your men tonight. Then I'm going on to Salem. Time is running out, Logan. A victory means as much here as in Virginia!"

III

LOGAN, obviously nonpulsed, laid a finger along his nose and stared at Jarvis and then at Bill and again at Jarvis. It was a bold game, calling for bold play, death, and perhaps with national defeat the stakes.

"Captain Jarvis may be here with special orders," Bill said. "I don't make any pretensions like that. I'm an Oregon man who came across the plains with my family in 'Fifty. They were killed by Indians in the Rogue River war. I lived in Jacksonville until 'Sixty-one, when I went East to sign up with the Union army. It took me about a month to see what they thought of the Pacific coast. Far as they were concerned, the Indians could have it back."

"There, Logan, he admits he's a Union—" Jarvis began.

"I said I served with the Union army," Bill cut in, "but I didn't serve long. I became a brother in Missouri, and I saw what could be done here. I made some contacts in California before I came north on the *Western Belle*. I learned several things when I was in 'Frisco. California is shipping four million dollars in gold a month that the Federal Government had to have, but the Government has done nothing in return for California. They don't like it down there. That's why they say the Pacific Republic is the answer."

"You make a good speech, Mr. Smith," Sally said approvingly. "You'll be one of Oregon's senators in the new republic, along with Ira."

"We have a right to our ambitions, Smith," Logan said soberly. "It isn't just California that doesn't like our treatment. There are plenty of us in Oregon who know something of the plans that England and France have. Look at what the Government gave us for protection." He pounded a fist into his palm. "A total of seven hundred men and nineteen officers in Oregon and Washington—not enough to

control the Indians! We haven't a single fort or coast or river defense in Oregon and Washington. And Jarvis, I doubt if the Confederacy would have done any more."

"We've got to take our destiny into our own hands," Bill added.

"What have you done about taking Oregon out?" Jarvis challenged. "Or capturing Fort Vancouver? Or arming and drilling your men?"

"We've drilled since the spring of 'Sixty-one," Logan answered, "but we haven't had the ammunition and guns. We have them now for one thousand men."

"How'd you get them?"

"They came north on the *Western Belle*."

"Have you seen them?"

"No. Smith told me about them."

Jarvis laughed, his penetrating brown eyes swinging to Bill. "So you told him, did you? You're a fake and a liar, Smith, if not worse. There couldn't have been a thousand guns on the *Western Belle* because the California Knights haven't enough guns to arm their own men." Jarvis stabbed the air with a forefinger. "Have you seen this man's credentials, Logan?"

"Has he seen yours?" Bill parried.

Jarvis drew an envelops from his coat pocket and handed it to Logan.

"You'll find enough there to hang me if your adjutant general got his hands on it."

Logan glanced over the papers and handed them back. "How about it, Smith?"

"I said I had no official position. I came back to Oregon in order to do what I could."

"You'd have something to identify yourself," Jarvis said doggedly.

"Reed took my papers."

"He had the grip," Logan said thoughtfully.

The Rebel captain dismissed that with a wave of his hand.

"Anybody can learn the grip. I tell you he's a Yankee spy!"

"Why are you so sure?" Sally asked.

"Before I left I was told that a Yankee spy might beat me to Oregon to counter my moves." Jarvis clenched his fists until the knuckles were white, lips drawn tight against his teeth. "Confound it, Logan! We've got too much at stake to take any

chances! One man like Smith who worms his way into our confidence can beat us."

BILL took a step toward Jarvis, hands fisted. "I've stood more from this man than I usually take from any man, Logan. It strikes me there may be a reason for him taking the line he has."

"What?" Logan demanded.

"The South needs our help, but also looking ahead to the day when they will be free. They want us. California's gold and our agricultural wealth. Jarvis wants to lick the Pacific Republic before it's born, and one way to start is to get rid of me. You'll be next."

It was the only line Bill could play, and he saw that Cole Jarvis had come to the end of his self-control.

He exploded, right hand sweeping down for his gun.

But Jarvis didn't make the draw. Bill had expected the move and was on the man, right fist sledging him on the jaw.

Jarvis reeled back, cursing, leaving his face wide open while he struggled to lift his gun. Bill closed with him, gripping his wrist, forcing him back against the wall while his own right drove repeatedly into Jarvis's lean, weather-darkened face. Then, out of nowhere, the roof crashed down on Bill Smith's head. Falling away from Jarvis, he sprawled full length on the rag carpet. . . .

Bill was in bed when he came to in the same room where he had undressed. His clothes still wet, hung from a chair. He sat up and immediately fell back, pain slashing through his head. He lay still for a time, thinking about what had happened and puzzled by it. Cole Jarvis had not knocked him out. It must have been Logan.

Bill couldn't understand that because he had thought he'd kept even with Jarvis in their word duel as far as Logan was concerned.

Bill sat up, gritting his teeth, while waves of nausea beat at him. It passed presently, and he lurched across the room to the window. The sky had cleared, except for a few ragged clouds that hugged the western hills. Timber crowded to the edge of the plowed field, the great firs melting together into a black impenetrable mass.

The river, Bill thought, was higher than

it had been this morning. It was a sullen gray barrier that could not be crossed short of the ferry they had used and the ferryman, he remembered, was one of the faithful.

Shrugging, Bill went back to bed. His chances of getting out of here alive stood at exactly zero, but there was the one puzzling question that kept nagging at his mind.

Why hadn't he been killed?

Bill was still worrying about it when Sally came in. She shook her head when he started to get up. "You're staying in bed. I'm afraid I hit you harder than I intended."

"I thought it was Logan," he said.

"I'm guilty. I hope you'll forgive me."

He rubbed his head. "What did you use—a crowbar?"

"No." She smiled ruefully. "It was a vase, and I broke it."

"I suppose you're sorry about the vase."

"Your head's in one piece, but the vase isn't. We brought it across the plains in 'Fifty-one."

"I'm going to get—"

When he started to sit up, she pushed him back again. "I give the orders, Mr. Smith. You take them. You see, I think you're a Federal agent, and I want to keep you alive."

She was close to him now, her eyes reflecting the smile that lingered on her lips. She had had no more sleep than he had had the night before, but she looked as bright as when he had first seen her in Salem.

Again, as in the stage office, he found that she disturbed him in a way no woman had ever done before.

"I've got to keep reminding myself that you bashed my head," he said brusquely.

"You might learn to like me," he said softly. "Or would it do for a Federal agent to like a Copperhead girl?"

"If you're so sure I'm a Federal man, why am I still alive?"

"Logan isn't convinced that you are. I knocked you out because you might have killed Jarvis. Or the other way around. In either case, your usefulness would have been destroyed. You've got to go to the meeting tonight and get back to Reed with their plans."

"You sound like a Federal agent yourself."

"Would that be surprising?"

"Surprising isn't the word."

"You saw Reed?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you there was a spy here?"

"Yes, but he said the man was unofficial."

"The state has a dozen self-appointed Union detectives, a few of them useful. Without the information they gather, Reed would have been unable to stop the Copperhead movement as he has. Didn't he tell you how to meet any of them?"

"No."

HE SAW that that worried her. She walked to the window and came back. "We've got to work together, Mr. Smith. Cole Jarvis was right when he said that time was running out. They're ready to act, and Reed's got to know. You've still got Logan fooled, and he'll take you to the meeting, no matter what Jarvis thinks."

He wanted to believe her and knew he could not. He said, "I hope they let me in."

She sat down on the bed again and leaned toward him. "Why didn't Reed tell you how to get in?"

"Maybe he didn't trust me."

Her lips were close to his. They were rich and inviting, and he felt again that eager questing of her eyes. He saw her shoulders rise and fall with her breathing. The fragrance of her hair was in his nostrils. He saw emotion flow across her face.

"A man and woman can make a hard team to beat," she breathed. "If Reed didn't trust you, I know I shouldn't, but I have no choice. If we do this right, we can deliver a death blow to the Copperheads in Oregon."

She was, he thought bitterly, the greatest actress he had ever seen. The disturbance grew and burned to a high flame in him.

He closed his eyes.

"I wonder if this is the way Delilah worked?" he murmured.

She rose. For a moment she stared down at him, her face composed. "Did you mean the implication you put into your words?"

"I meant it all right." He scowled, beating down the feeling that he was making a mistake. "Go back and tell Logan it didn't work."

"Then heaven help you and the Union

cause in Oregon." She swung away and walked to the door, heels clicking sharply on the floor. "Stay in bed until I call you to supper, or you won't live to attend that meeting."

When the door closed, Bill got up and searched through his clothes. His guns and belt were gone. He went back to bed and lay still, eyes on the ceiling. Through all those months in the Missouri hills, when he had played tag with death, he had dreamed his dream of a girl he'd find when the violence of war was finished and the guns were laid down. Sally Biddle had everything his mind had fashioned for the girl he would love.

Now, having found her, it was inconceivable that there would be this gulf between them.

Yet there could be no doubt of her duplicity. The missing guns were proof enough.

IV

BILL Smith slept most of the afternoon, his turbulent thoughts fading before the encroachments of fatigue. He was awakened by Ira Logan opening the door. He shook the cobwebs out of his head and sat up. The sun, he saw, was almost hidden in a maze of salmon-tinted clouds that hugged the western horizon.

"Sally asked me to get you up," Logan turned back to the door and, reaching it, paused. "I've got to make a decision, Smith. I thought you were the Confederate agent we had been expecting, and when I saw the way Reed and Calkins treated you, I was convinced of it. Jarvis says it was a put-up job." He shook his head. "On the other hand, you could do us a lot of good if you're telling the truth."

"You're convinced of Jarvis's identity?"

"There can be no doubt."

"If I was a Federal agent, I wouldn't tell you. If I'm not, there's nothing more I can say to convince you." He rose, a hand gingerly feeling of his jaw. "I got hit quite a wallop."

"Come on," Logan called as he walked out.

Bill found that his clothes were dry. When he slid into his coat, he immediately felt a weight in his pocket. It was, he discovered, a small pistol. He went down the stairs, trying to understand this and find-

ing no explanation, except the one he could not believe. If Sally Biddle were the Union spy she was making herself out to be, she wouldn't have taken his guns in the first place.

They were already seated at the table, Sally at one end, Ira Logan at the other. Pat Malone and Cole Jarvis were sitting next to the wall. Sally motioned toward the vacant chair on the other side of the table.

"I hope you'll forgive us for starting," she said to Bill.

"Just like he'll forgive you for breaking that vase over his head," Jarvis said, with considerable ill humor.

"How could he help forgiving anybody so fair?" Malone asked.

"Depend upon the Irish," Logan said quickly. "You see why Smith's a good politician."

"He'll be a good politician or a dead one," Jarvis snapped.

"Politics later, gentlemen," Sally said sharply.

It was a silent meal, the stillness broken only by the clatter of dishes and Malone's chomping and by the cook, Martha, pattering in from the kitchen with another plate of venison steak or a dish of potatoes.

Bill, watching them, felt the ruthless driving sense of duty that was in Cole Jarvis, the indecision in Ira Logan, the uncertainty in Pat Malone. But there was a depth to Sally Biddle he could not determine. She presided at the table, motioning to Martha when something was needed, as composed as if this were just another meal.

Malone walked into the parlor with Bill when the meal was finished.

"Reed had a fit over the jail break," he said. "In fact, the whole town is in an uproar. You'd better stay out of Salem."

"They'll forget it. What are your intentions?"

Malone shot a glance at Logan and Jarvis. "I can't swing in with you, he said guardedly. "A man's got to have some convictions, or he'd better go out and shoot himself. I'd get ahead under the Pacific Republic, and I won't under a Republican Administration, but as long as Oregon's in the Union, I've got to stay loyal." He grinned sourly. "Reed explained that after they took you to jail, Smith. I wouldn't

have come here today if I hadn't promised Ira."

Bill was surprised that there was this much bottom to the man. He moved over to stand beside the fireplace, covertly watching Logan and Jarvis who were talking in a far corner of the room. Malone took a seat and lighted a cigar.

Horsemen were riding in, and lights had come to life in the barn. Suddenly Logan wheeled away from Jarvis and strode across the room.

"You can go with us, Smith," he said brusquely, "but if you can't get in, you're a dead man."

"I'll attend to the job personally," Jarvis said. "I'll be behind you."

"I take it back shooting is your specialty," Bill murmured. "I'd like to have my guns, Logan."

"I have them," Jarvis snapped. "You'll get them when I'm sure you're not lying."

THEY left the house, Bill walking beside Logan, Jarvis a pace behind. It was dark now, the stars making their pinpoints of light, a half moon beginning to show above the tops of the firs. The barn door was closed, and when they reached it, Bill could see the shadowy figure of a man at the corner of the building.

"The outer door, Smith," Logan murmured.

Bill stepped to the corner, and with his mouth close to the man's ear, whispered a word. The man opened the door, saying, "You may enter, brother."

It was a large barn, but the room in which the meeting was held, closed in between a wall of hay on one side and the stable on the other, was small. There were about fifty men at the meeting, Bill estimated, which meant that the entire strength of the castle had turned out.

"Two brothers recently arrived from the East," Logan said. "Bill Smith"—he nodded at Bill—"from Missouri, formerly of Jackson County, and Cole Jarvis from Richmond."

Jarvis had talked to some of these men, Bill thought, for he felt the cold hostility they had for him. They eyed him a moment. Then there was a stirring among them, and a man stepped forward.

"I'm the inner door."

Again Bill whispered the required words and turned to Jarvis. "Satisfied yet,

my stubborn brother?"

"No."

"Have you passed the inner door?"

Jarvis chewed on the tip of his mustache, face showing his irritation. Stepping forward to the man to whom Bill had spoken, he satisfied the requirements. Swinging back to Bill, he said challengingly,

"The oath, my friend, and have your neck ready for a rope."

"I, William Smith," Bill said without hesitation, "in the presence of God and many witnesses, do solemnly declare that I do herein freely, and in good conscience, renew the solemn vows which I plighted in the Vestibule—" He went on through to, "Divine Essence! And ye men of Earth! Witness the sincerity of my soul touching these, my vows! Amen."

Bill read disappointment on the Rebel captain's face. "Can you do as well, Jarvis?" he asked.

"Almost," Jarvis snapped and repeated the oath. Facing Logan, he said, "I have something to say to the brothers."

"Proceed."

Jarvis took a position along the south wall so that his gaze could sweep the room.

"The time for decisive action is here. The South needs your help. Whether you join the Confederacy or organize your Pacific Republic, you need the South's help. Our first step in Oregon is the removal of Adjutant General Reed. I understand a previous attempt failed. This time we will not fail. Our next move will be to attack Fort Vancouver. We will need every man here bearing what arms you have. Once the fort is in our hands, we will be ready to move. If necessary, we will send a force south to aid our California brothers."

Jarvis nodded at Logan. "I would like permission to ask your secretary to send a message in cipher to the other castles in Oregon, promising your unqualified support."

"Permission granted."

"Plans for the removal of the adjutant general will be made by the Salem castles. I am suggesting New Year's Eve for the attack on the fort, and I plan to remain in Oregon to give whatever military assistance I can."

"Brother Smith, you have something to say?" asked Logan.

"Nothing," Bill answered quickly, "ex-

cept that I want no part of the Confederacy. We should officially inform Captain Jarvis and the officers of the Confederacy that our alliance with them is temporary."

Bill had expected to drive a wedge between Jarvis and the others, but instantly knew he had failed. Jarvis nodded his agreement.

"There will be no trouble on that score."

THE meeting broke up within a few minutes. Most of the men filed out, mounted and rode away. Three stayed, and the instant the doors had closed, Jarvis raked Bill, Logan, and the three others with his restless eyes.

"I asked Logan to select three men whose loyalty to act ruthlessly could not be questioned," the Rebel captain said. He motioned to Bill. "I am not convinced that this man is with us. I have a test that will leave no doubt. I am afraid that you, Logan, will be tested as well."

The meeting had gone too smoothly. Now trouble was here. Bill eased away from the others toward the door, hands in his coat pockets, fingers of his right hand wrapped around the butt of his gun.

"I don't think there is a brother who has done as much for the cause in Oregon as I have," Logan said sharply. "Why should I be tested?"

"Because it was the assigned duty of this castle to remove the adjutant general," Jarvis said somberly. "It was not done. Why, Logan?"

"Our plans went wrong."

"And why? I'll tell you what I heard in Albany. You failed because Reed had been informed and was prepared. There is a Union spy here who enjoys your confidence."

"Impossible!" Logan said angrily.

"I was given proof in Albany," Jarvis went on, "that this spy is Sally Biddle."

Bill felt weakness crawl into him. He had not believed her. Now, with the odds five to one, he was helpless. Jarvis was the sort who would kill a woman as quickly as he would a man.

Logan looked as if he had been struck. The three men beside him stood motionless, eyes swinging to Logan.

"I can't believe that," Logan muttered. "She's done too much for us."

"Exactly. That's how she gained your confidence. She's clever and beautiful,

and therefore, doubly dangerous."

"Your proof?" Logan demanded.

"She has been observed mailing letters to Reed. Last week, she attempted to procure, from one of the Albany brothers, information about my coming. She succeeded because this brother knew how you regarded her. Within the hour, she had mailed another letter to Reed. This is your problem, Logan, and if you're as loyal as you claim, you will agree to her execution."

"No!" Logan said shortly.

"If you doubt me, keep her here until you have communicated with the Albany brothers. They were holding their information until I came. Otherwise you would have heard sooner."

Logan ran a hand over his face. A film of sweat on his forehead made a shine in the lanternlight.

"She has a right to defend herself, Jarvis. Miggs"—he motioned to one of the men—"fetch her."

V

FOR the moment Bill Smith had been forgotten. If he held his silence and did nothing to prevent the murder of Sally Biddle, he would convince Jarvis that he was who he said he was. But he couldn't do that any more than he could sit by idly and watch Jarvis plot to take Oregon out of the Union. There was a slim chance he could do both jobs that had to be done, and he made his gamble that way.

Miggs started toward the door, but before he'd taken more than a step, Bill rammed the man next to him against Logan, spilling both against the hay. Jarvis grabbed his revolver, but before he could fire, Bill squeezed the trigger of the gun in his pocket. Jarvis lurched with the impact of the bullet, losing a vital breath of time which Bill utilized by sending Miggs reeling with a second shot. Then he was through the door and sprinting for the house.

Bullets searched for him, but the deceptive moonlight and the speed with which he ran made him a poor target. The front door of the house flew open, and Sally stood there, a clear silhouette in the rectangle of light.

"Get back!" Bill yelled. "Jarvis is after you."

Sally disappeared inside. Bill hit the doorway just as a bullet raked his side. He was in the house then, slamming the door shut and dropping the bar.

"I'm not surprised," Sally said composedly. "I had to run a risk in Albany. Ira wouldn't tell me about Jarvis, and Reed had to know." She handed Bill's gun belts to him. "I found those in Jarvis's room."

Bill buckled the belts around him. "Have you got a place we can hold?" he asked hurriedly.

"The storeroom was built for that."

A bullet screamed through a window and slapped into the far wall. A man pounded on the door, yelling, "Open up, Sally! We want Smith!"

Bill fired through the door, heard the man scream. Then Sally was pulling him across the room.

Miggs had kicked the glass from a window and was forcing his way in. He straddled there a moment, one foot in the house, one outside. He fired, but he'd hurried his shot, and the bullet only raked Bill's left shoulder. Bill, wheeling in the doorway of the dining room, lanced a bullet through the man's heart, bringing him out of the window in a slowly wilting drop.

"Martha!" Sally cried. "Pat! The storeroom!"

Pat Malone was lumbering down the stairs, his red-veined face showing the fear that was squeezing him. Martha hurried out of the kitchen.

"I smelled trouble at supper," she said. "I smelled it. I smelled it."

The storeroom was in the northwest corner of the house. There were two small windows set high in the wall. Below them were a number of gun-holes. Bacons and hams hung from the ceiling; sacks of potatoes and onions were on the floor. These things Bill saw in one quick glance. He saw, too, the long rifles on the wall and the solid door that could be securely barred.

"What did they decide at the meeting?" Sally asked.

"The Salem brothers will make another try for Reed. Jarvis set New Year's Eve for the attack on the fort."

"Reed's got to know," Sally murmured. "They'll act fast, now that Jarvis is here."

"They won't hurt me," Malone said,

wiping sweat from his face. "I'm no hero, Sally, and I don't know what this is all about, but I can ride out of here and get to Salem."

"Jarvis is a Confederate agent," she told him, "and his coming has brought this to a head." She motioned to Bill. "We're Union spies." She turned questioning eyes to Bill. "I believe he could make it."

"Maybe," Bill said, knowing that Malone wouldn't get out of the clearing.

"We can stay here," Sally went on. "They can have the rest of the house. Reed will send help as soon as Pat gets to Salem."

It wouldn't do. Bill had seen too much of this in the Border states, and he knew what Jarvis would do.

"No good," he said. "They'll burn the house, and neither Reed nor anybody else can prove it wasn't an accident."

FOR the first time Bill saw the composure leave Sally's face. "This is my father's donation land claim," she said. "He built the house. I—I'd hate to see it burned."

Sally would be safe here with Martha for a few minutes. Those few minutes had to be long enough to make a winning fight outside in the moon-bright yard.

"I think you've got the idea, Malone," Bill said, "and I'm apologizing to you. When I saw you in Salem, I didn't think you were that much man."

"I don't hold with this violence," Malone's lips quivered. "I told Logan that."

"Sally!" Logan called from outside the door. "Can you hear me?"

Sally looked questioningly at Bill. When he nodded, she answered, "What is it, Ira?"

"We want Smith. We'll have to burn the house if he doesn't come out."

"Tell him Malone's coming," Bill whispered.

"Pat's coming!" Sally called. "He says he doesn't belong in this."

"All right," Logan shouted. "We'll give him a minute. Then you'll have to send Smith out, or we'll fire the house."

"Lock yourself in here," Bill said to Sally. "I'll watch from the back door to see that Malone gets clear. I'll knock twice when I get back."

Bill wormed his way along the kitchen floor to keep out of the light of the lamp

on the table. Malone walked upright beside him.

"They won't let you out of here, Malone," Bill whispered. "Still want to go ahead?"

"I'll do what I can," the fat man said.

"Then walk across the yard and call to them. If I can get Logan and Jarvis spotted, I'll come out shooting."

"All right," Malone said and left.

One minute! There would be no more than that.

"The minute I gave Malone is up!" Logan called. "Now we want Smith."

"Hold on, Ira," Malone called. He was in the yard now, the moonlight full upon his wide body. "I told you there wasn't any sense in bringing the trouble to Oregon that they've had in Missouri and Kentucky. I don't like this shooting, and I'm getting out."

It took cold courage to stand out there like that, courage that Pat Malone hadn't known he possessed, and Bill felt his admiration for the man grow large.

"All right," Logan said irritably. "Get out!"

"You're too soft," Jarvis snarled. "Want him to go to Salem and tell Reed our plans?"

"Malone doesn't know them."

"Smith does."

Malone had gone on and had almost reached the barn. From their voices, Bill placed Jarvis and Logan in one of the small sheds south of the barn.

Now he yelled, "Ride like fury, Malone!" and started toward the shed.

Jarvis and Logan were standing in the open maw of the shed, vague figures in the blackness. Jarvis fired at Malone, a foot-long tongue of flame dancing from the muzzle of his gun. Before Jarvis could change position, Bill thumbed the hammer. His shot brought Jarvis lurching out of the shed into the moonlight.

Logan was shooting coldly and methodically, slugs breathing past Bill's face, tugging at his clothes, slicing through the flesh under his left arm. Then Ira Logan's gun was silent. The last bullet in Bill's gun had caught him squarely in the chest.

A long rifle sounded behind Bill. Pulling his other gun, he wheeled and held his fire. The last Copperhead was down. Sally, shooting from the corner of the house, had finished the fight.

"You weren't fooling me any, Mr. Smith," Sally said crisply. "I knew you aimed to smoke them out, and I thought you might need help."

"I guess I did," he murmured. "I didn't see the one you got till after you drilled him."

JARVIS and Logan were dead. The man Sally had shot was in no condition to make more trouble, and Pat Malone was very much alive.

"So much fat on me they couldn't get a bullet into my vitals," Malone whispered. "You know, Smith, there are a lot of Breckinridge Democrats like me when it gets to the shooting stage."

"Reed's going to do some apologizing when I tell him," Bill said.

They carried Malone inside, and Martha, who was nearly as good a doctor as she was a cook, said she'd keep him alive until Bill fetched a doctor from Albany. Sally bandaged Bill's scratches.

The horse saddled, Bill faced Sally in the down-thrown cone of light from the lantern hanging above them.

"Apologizing seems to be all I can do right now, but looks like you've got one coming. I should have believed you."

"I wouldn't have trusted you if you had," she told him. "Reed doesn't know who I am, but I picked up messages from him through a man in Albany I trusted. I knew you were coming and about when you'd be here. That's why I was in the stage office in Salem. Then after what happened in the statehouse, I couldn't be sure."

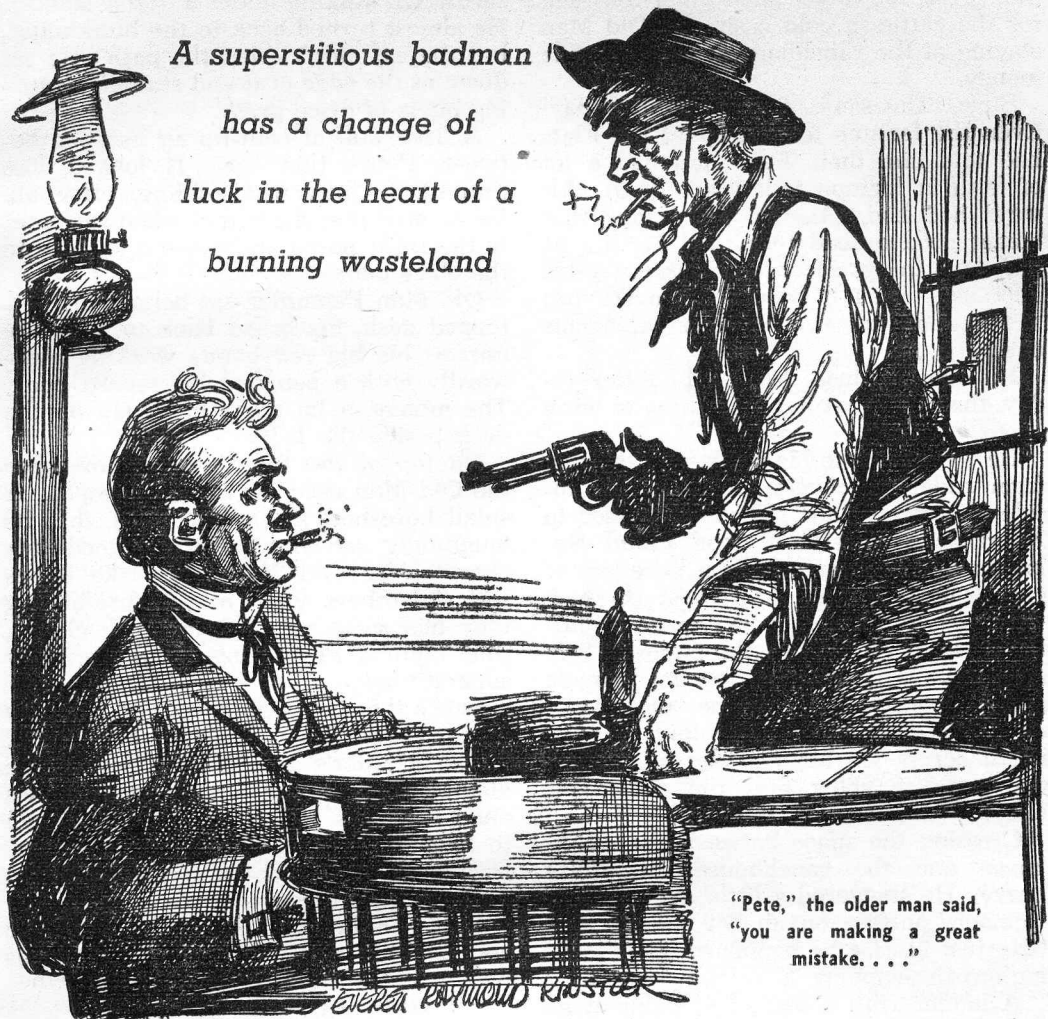
"You don't know your friends till the shooting starts," he said, swinging into saddle. "I guess you'll be here when I get back."

She smiled at him. "I'll be here."

She was in the timber then, following a twisting trail, the firs almost blotting out the moonlight. The sound of the river died behind him. The guns were silent. There was a great stillness all around him, and there was the comforting knowledge that with the death of Cole Jarvis the immediate Copperhead threat had been thwarted.

And one other thought kept crowding into his mind. There was no gulf between him and Sally Biddle!

A superstitious badman
has a change of
luck in the heart of a
burning wasteland



"Pete," the older man said,
"you are making a great
mistake. . . ."

Good Luck Boomerang

By BEN FRANK

THE young fellow's name was Pete Nau, and the day was Thursday, late, with the sun a blistering ball of melted gold among the red-tinged, scattered clouds. Standing there at the bunkhouse window, watching Old Man Pepmiller's rannies and the herd of cattle grow small

in the heat-blurring distance, Pete grinned a crooked grin and lifted his thin shoulders.

Thursday was his lucky day. He knew by the way things had worked out today—everybody believing that he was too sick to help drive the cattle to the railroad

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that night, the buyer paying the Old Man for the cattle in cold cash, the Old Man staying at the ranchhouse alone with the money.

Sure, Thursday was his lucky day! Even the fortune teller over at the Flats had told him that. Pete Nau had a lot of faith in fortune tellers and such. Always had had. And in the things that meant good or bad luck. All his life he had done things according to the way his luck lay. Even if people did make fun of him and wink at each other behind his back.

His narrow face tightened. After today, they wouldn't have anything to wink about.

He went back to his bunk, dug the gun from under the covers, and slipped it inside his sweaty shirt. Then he crossed to Nebraska Jones's bunk and found Nebraska's pocket compass in a little box of engineering tools at the foot of the bed.

Pete's crooked grin returned to his thin face as he slipped the compass into a pocket. With it to guide him, it made no difference whether the night was cloudy or clear. He would find his way north across the strip of desert without the stars to show him the directions. Easy!

Crossing the space between the bunkhouse and the ranchhouse, he didn't hurry. He staggered a little and held his stomach, putting on an act for the Old Man just in case he happened to be looking out the window.

A ladder with a bucket of paint at its base leaned against the house where Nebraska Jones had left it. Besides being a cowboy and having some knowledge of engineering, Nebraska was a painter of sorts.

The young fellow didn't walk under the ladder. Not Pete Nau. Walking under a ladder would be canceling out the good luck that Thursday held for him. He believed in keeping his luck clean.

HE CIRCLED the ladder and lifted his eyes. What he saw stopped him cold. Buzzards circling high overhead. Then his eyes dropped, and a new fear held him. Old Man Pepmiller's black cat was headed for the path in front of him.

He felt his insides knot up. A black cat across a man's path was worse than buz-

zards. Or walking under a dozen ladders. He almost turned back to the bunkhouse, but the cat didn't cross the path. He sat down at the edge of it and studied a moving blade of dried grass.

A little puff of pent-up air escaped between Pete's thin lips. It looked like Thursday's luck was holding, after all. He scooted past the cat, climbed the steps to the front porch and crossed silently to the office door.

Old Man Pepmiller sat behind his flat-topped desk, his broad back to a square mirror, his big red hands working awkwardly with a pen and his record book. The money, a fat stack of it, lay on the desk beside the ledger.

On top of the bills lay the horseshoe the Old Man used for a paper-weight. A small horseshoe, gleaming bright, that he laughingly referred to as his good-luck charm. The Old Man, Nebraska Jones and the others were always pretending they had some sure enough luck charm, thus kidding Pete along about his many superstitions.

Pete's thin face tightened, and he drew a deep, harsh breath into his bony body. Old Pepmiller's fun-making days were about over. And as for Nebraska Jones and the others, they wouldn't have much to laugh at, either, when they got home in the morning and found the Old Man dead and the money gone.

Old Pepmiller looked up from the ledger and ran his stubby fingers through his bushy white hair.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

The gun in Pete Nau's hand stopped him short. He didn't look scared. He looked more angry than anything. But he would look scared in a minute, Pete knew. Plenty scared.

"I suppose you're after this money?" the Old Man went on a little breathlessly. "I reckon your sickness was faked."

"Right." Pete grinned.

This was going to be fun, letting the Old Man learn how well he, Pete, the superstitious, had planned things. Showing the old slave-driver that he didn't have a chance.

The Old Man leaned back in his chair, his bushy head touching the smooth glass of the mirror.

"Pete," he said, "you're making a mighty big mistake. You ain't the kind

who can get away with something like this."

The old fool, Pete kept thinking. The poor old fool!

"I'll get away with it," he said. "Thursday's my lucky day!"

"Lucky day?"

The Old Man's eyes narrowed, and he let one hand drop below the desk top.

"Watch your hands!" Pete ordered.

The Old Man laid his hands on top of the desk. The nails were thick and broken.

"Of course, you don't believe in things like lucky days," Pete went on, letting a sneer creep into his voice.

"Maybe not," the Old Man said. "But I know that when the cards are stacked against a man, he can't win, lucky day, or no!"

"Yeah?" Pete grinned.

"Like they're stacked against you, son. To begin with, you won't risk riding south toward town. You'll ride north across the desert to the State line and the badlands."

"Sure." Pete nodded.

"And it's going to be cloudy tonight. You won't have no stars to guide you."

Pete laughed harshly and drew the compass from his pocket with his left hand.

"I won't need stars," he said. "Not with Nebraska's little helper along."

The Old Man looked beaten.

"Never thought of that compass—but there's something else, Pete." He leaned forward, touched the stack of money with a thick finger. "There's thirteen thousand dollars in that pile. Thirteen's a mighty unlucky number. Even if you don't take it all, there's still no getting around that number thirteen."

THE puncher's narrow face tightened dangerously. Even with a gun on him, the Old Man was poking fun at him about his superstitious beliefs. Trying to scare him.

"I'll chance that," he rasped. "I'll—"

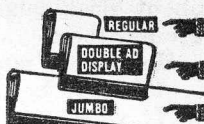
His eyes lifted to the mirror, and his voice choked off. Reflected in the mirror, he saw the open door back of him. The black cat had just walked stiffly across the porch in front of the door. The Old Man had seen the cat, too, and smiled.

[Turn page]

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"A black cat across your path, son," he said, and shoved to his feet. "Laugh that off!"

Pete cursed, and his gun hand shook a little. What was it a gypsy had told him about black cats. Something about going around them.

He grinned suddenly.

"I'll leave by the back way," he said.

"It won't matter what you do," the Old Man said grimly. "If you take the money, there'll be the curse of the thirteen thousand dollars of stolen money on your head. You won't get around that."

"Shut up!" Pete gritted, and thumbed the hammer.

For the first time, the Old Man seemed to realize that Pete was going to shoot him. His face went ashy white, and he swayed forward.

"So you're going to kill me, Pete," he said hoarsely. "So it'll be thirteen thousand dollars of blood money? Reckon you'll need my lucky horse shoe and any other luck you can lay your hands on after this!"

The Old Man reached for the horseshoe, and Pete stiffened. That bright steel horseshoe, besides making a dangerous weapon, could be a mighty potent good-luck charm. Pete believed in keeping his luck clean. He didn't want old Peppermiller getting his hands on that horseshoe. Things were bad enough as they were—buzzards in the sky, a black cat, the number thirteen mixed up with the money.

"Don't touch that!" he screamed.

The Old Man didn't pay any attention to him. He just kept on reaching, and Pete squeezed the trigger.

The gun crashed, and the Old Man staggered back a step, clawing at the bloody hole in his scalp. The mirror behind him shattered into a thousand pieces as the bullet plowed on into it. Peppermiller's knees gave way, and he sprawled across the floor and lay still.

Inside, Pete Nau felt weak, not because he had shot a man, but because his bullet had smashed a mirror. Breaking a mirror was bad luck in anybody's language. Seven years of it! But the deed was done, and there was nothing he could do about it. Unless—

His eyes fixed on the horseshoe.

Shadows had crept into the room. Out-

side, the low sun had lost itself behind a rising cloud. Pretty soon it would be dark, and the strip of desert country between the ranch and the border would begin to lose a little of its killing heat. By starting now and pushing his horse hard, he could cross the wasteland before the morning heat set in. Once across and into the Border country, he would be safe. Broken mirror, or no!

He lifted the horseshoe from the pile of money. There weren't any nail holes in it. It was strictly an ornamental horseshoe with the words "GOOD LUCK" stamped on it.

Pete Nau believed in things like that—lucky horseshoes, buzzards, broken mirrors. After he had stuffed the thirteen thousand dollars into his pockets, he picked up the gadget and took it with him. Some deep inner superstition made him believe that the horseshoe would balance up with the broken mirror. Maybe it would help him safely across the wasteland to the north.

He almost went out the front way. But he remembered the black cat in time and, cursing savagely, he turned and followed a narrow hall through the house to the back door. He stepped out on the back porch, and there sat the cat, washing his coal-black face and glancing up out of green eyes.

Pete cursed, lifted his gun with a shaking hand and sent a bullet at the cat. He missed, and the cat leaped to the ground and crawled under the porch.

PANTING hoarsely, Pete stumbled around the side of the house to the front. His horse had been saddled earlier, and stood at the hitch-rail, ready to go. He hooked the lucky horseshoe over the saddle-horn and thonged it there with a length of leather.

His eyes lifted. Overhead, a buzzard moved along the edge of a cloud bank. A trickle of sweat ran into Pete's eyes. Cursing, he leaped into the saddle and spurred his horse into a dead run. Once clear of the yard fence, he headed north.

Darkness fell fast. By the time he reached the edge of the desert sand, it was like black velvet. He dug out the compass, struck a match and glanced at the needle. It pointed straight ahead. So

[Turn to page 126]

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far, he had kept his sense of direction.

Carefully he slipped the instrument back into his pocket, thinking he musn't lose it, and urged his blowing horse forward into the deepening sand. He wanted to be safely across this wasteland before the next morning's heat closed in on him.

In spite of the darkness, the desert was still hot. It was as if the clouds were thick blankets, holding the heat next to the earth. The air was without motion, and Pete Nau could feel his thin shirt sticking to his narrow collar-bones.

He put his hand forward, touched the warm steel of the horseshoe, and smiled thinly. His hand moved on and came in contact with the horse's neck, and he lost his smile. The animal was wet with sweat and needed a rest. Pulling him to a stop, he struck a match and checked with the compass. He was still headed north.

He fumbled for his canteen, found it and drank half the warm, slimy contents. No need to be saving with the water. By morning he would be where there was plenty of water.

The horse wasn't ready to go on, but Pete spurred him forward, anyway. Every moment counted. If he expected to be out of the desert by morning, he couldn't spare the animal.

Stifling minutes dragged into hours, with the horse slowing in spite of all the urging. Overhead, the sky remained inky black. All around him was a suffocating blackness. The kid shuddered. If it wasn't for Nebraska's compass—

A terrifying thought struck him. Suppose he should lose the compass? The sweat on his face turned clammy as he dug frantically into his pocket. For a horrifying moment, he thought he had lost it, and then he found it.

A sigh of relief escaped him. He checked with the instrument again and noted with deep satisfaction that he still held his course.

Carefully he returned the compass to his pocket, and a grin twisted his thin face. His luck still held. He found the canteen and finished the water, thinking that morning and the cool safety of the hill country would soon be his.

His horse stumbled on, each step seeming to become a greater effort than the one before. Pete felt his own strength ebbing, and cursed himself for not bring-

ing along more water.

At regular intervals, he drew out the compass and checked his course by the flare of a match. North, always north, he rode on toward the State line. Toward the cool, green hills with water flowing between them. Toward the badlands back of the hills, and safety.

Morning came at last. It came quickly, with the breaking away of the low clouds and a flare of the rising sun in the east. Only the sun was not coming up out of the east! It was rising behind his back!

Pete Nau pulled his staggering horse to a halt, while his heart pounded up into his burning throat. Wild-eyed, he stared over his shoulder at the globe of fire behind him. The sun had no business being there. It should be on his right!

He looked about. By all rights, he should be at the edge of the green hills. But there were no green hills there. Only bare sandhills. As far as he could see in all directions, there was nothing but the yellow sand, which was rapidly turning white under the blaze of the rising sun. A great fear gripped him, and he cursed.

WITH trembling hands, he dug out the compass and stared at it with blurring eyes. The compass and the sun didn't agree on the directions, and Pete knew that it was the compass which was wrong. He shoved it back into his pocket and cursed Nebraska Jones. Nebraska had always boasted about the accuracy of his compass. Nebraska had lied, and Pete's fear turned to bitter hate for old Pepmiller's best man.

He put the sun on his right and spurred his horse forward. The heat increased, pounding down from above, beating back from the glittering sand below. The horse took the heat and the killing pace until the sun was high overhead. Then he fell and refused to get up.

Pete Nau struggled on, fighting the burning sand that clutched at his dragging feet. His thirst became a horrifying pain in his throat and spread over his entire body. It robbed him of his fear, of his thinking. It turned him into a floundering, crazy beast.

Some time during that afternoon, he stumbled to his knees and couldn't get up. And then he saw the green hills a short

[Turn page]

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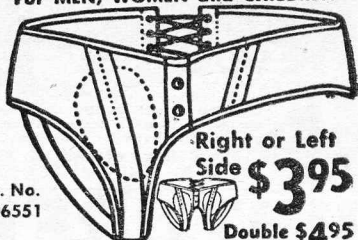
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distance ahead. And water. A huge lake of it, with white birds circling over it. He laughed crazily. He had made it in spite of Nebraska's compass.

Some way he got to his feet and realized that, according to the sun, the hills were on the west instead of the north. That meant that Nebraska's compass had been right, after all. It was the sun that was wrong. This day, the sun that was in the sky had come up in the south. Then he remembered that this was Friday. According to the fortune teller, Fridays were his unlucky days. No wonder the sun had come up in the south.

Laughing wildly, he dug the compass from his pocket and patted it with clumsy fingers.

"Good old compass!" he muttered between cracked lips. "Got me across! Got—"

His eyes froze on the instrument. The tiny needle trembled with his own trembling and pointed to the right of the hills. The compass and the sun agreed on which direction was north!

The kid began to shake all over, his teeth chattered, and he couldn't stop them. He was afraid to look up. Afraid of what he wouldn't see. He sank to his knees, and great sobs racked him. At last, he lifted his burning eyes. The green hills were gone! In that last moment of clarity, he knew that they had never been there, that seeing them had been a trick of his crazed mind.

But the birds were real. They circled high overhead, but now they were not white. They were black.

Some place, some time, he had lost his hat. The heat beat at his bare head mercilessly. He tried to shade his head with his arms. He lost his balance and toppled sideward, and his fingers dug into the sand.

His red-rimmed eyes lifted once more. Overheard, the buzzards circled in the bright sky. What could a man do against buzzards, an unlucky Friday, a broken mirror, the curse of thirteen thousand dollars' blood money?"

Pete Nau screamed and pressed his face against the blistering sand. His screams died in his throat, and the big, ugly birds circled lower and lower . . .

It was the circling buzzards that led Nebraska Jones and Old Man Peppmiller's

rannies to where Pete Nau lay, his face pressed into the hot sand, the fingers of his left hand spread wide, the compass gripped in his right.

NEBRASKA pried the compass out of the stiffening fingers.

"How'n thunder could he have got lost with this?" he growled.

No one ventured a guess. The rannies simply shook their heads in bewilderment as they helped Nebraska turn Pete's body over and dig the money from his pockets.

They buried the body, then followed Pete's dragging footprints back to where the dead horse lay. One of the boys took off the bridle, and another removed the saddle.

"Here's the Old Man's lucky horseshoe, tied to the saddle-horn," the cowboy with the saddle said.

Nebraska took the gleaming horseshoe.

"The Old Man'll be glad to get it back," he said. "He's right fond of it. His wife brought it back with her from her last trip East just before she died."

"Lucky thing for the Old Man that the lobo's aim was bad," the cowboy said. "If that bullet had been an inch lower, he'd be planted up on the hill beside his wife."

"Yeah," Nebraska agreed, toying with the horseshoe. "Mighty lucky." His voice trailed off, and he dug the compass from his pocket. "This horseshoe is a magnet," he went on. "It makes the needle of a compass go crazy."

His eyes jerked up to the men's faces. Jaws sagging, they were staring back at him out of wide, understanding eyes.

"Yeah," Nebraska said hoarsely. "Crazy!"

Slowly a grin spread over his long, homely face.

"Looks like Pete was following the lucky horseshoe," he went on, "but there wasn't no luck in it for him. No luck except bad luck!"

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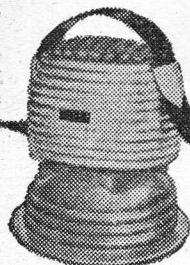
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Mail this coupon with only \$1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman \$8.95 plus delivery—or send \$9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of **FAT**. **MAIL COUPON NOW!**

ALSO USE IT FOR ACES AND PAINS



CAN'T SLEEP

Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.



MUSCULAR ACES:

A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

**LOSE WEIGHT
OR NO CHARGE**

USED BY EXPERTS

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

ORDER IT TODAY

SENT ON APPROVAL—MAIL COUPON NOW!

SPOT REDUCER CO., Dept. B-129

1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose \$1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only \$8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return **SPOT REDUCER** within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose \$12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name

Address

City State

☐ **SAVE POSTAGE** — check here if you enclose \$9.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Same money back guarantee applies. ☐ I enclose \$12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

MAIL THIS 10-DAY FREE TRIAL COUPON NOW!

\$100⁰⁰ A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU



FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

SAVE MONEY!

There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!

JUST LOOK

The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for every accident, and for all common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered. . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your \$1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

MATERNITY

Benefits At Small Extra Cost
 Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays \$20.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO

Benefits At No Extra Cost
 In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—For Hospital Bills, up to . . . \$500.00
 For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to \$500.00
 For Orthopedic Appliances, up to . . . \$500.00
TOTAL OF \$1,500.00

3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY

for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy **PAYS \$100.00 PER WEEK** for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid **DIRECT TO YOU** to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of \$50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What \$100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this **READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU**. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

REMEMBER—\$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY \$14.25 PER DAY!

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. **SEND NO MONEY**—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON

The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company
 Hospital Department K-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska
 Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....
 Address.....
 City or Town.....State.....

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Assets of \$12,700,000 as of January 1, 1952
 Hospital Department K-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska



No other anti-freeze gives your car the same complete protection!



WITH **PRESTONE** BRAND **ANTI-FREEZE**

You're **SET**

Just put "Prestone" anti-freeze in and forget it till spring! No "boil-away" worries... no repair bills — its special inhibitors give the world's best protection against rust, clogging and foaming.

You're **SAFE**

High compression engines and car-heaters make non-evaporating anti-freeze more important now than ever. There's not one drop of boil-away alcohol or methanol in "Prestone" anti-freeze.

You're **SURE**

With "Prestone" brand anti-freeze in your car, you're sure you've bought the best. It's America's No. 1 brand. No other anti-freeze gives your car the same complete protection. It's guaranteed!

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\$100 PER QT. IN QUART CANS

SCAN COURTESY OF EXCITER

